End of the Tether, end of the line

An AWF Case Study

A CASE ABOUT AN OWNER’S REQUEST TO EUTHANISE A PHYSICALLY HEALTHY ANIMAL FOR THE SAKE OF CONVENIENCE

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It’s coming to the end of lunchtime at an animal welfare charity clinic where you’re working as a locum. Looking down the list of fully-booked afternoon appointments on the computer to see what’s coming in, you notice that a euthanasia consult has been booked for 2pm – the first slot of the afternoon. In an accompanying note from the receptionist, the reason given by the owner for requesting euthanasia is “aggression”.

There is little relevant information in the patient’s notes, other than that the patient is a border collie that was last seen two years ago with mild signs of gastrointestinal disease, which resolved. The dog hasn’t been seen at the clinic since. You go to find the receptionist to ask her if she can give you any more details. She says the client was quite vague, but thinks she mentioned that the dog had bitten a child.

At 2pm a lady arrives with a bright and attentive border collie at her side. In the consulting room, she tells you her circumstances:

• The lady used to live in a house with a big garden, and the dog got most of its exercise from running around outside all day, but she has had to move, for financial reasons, to a smaller house with only a back yard. The dog is spending all its time in the small back yard, with no stimulation and no exercise.

• The lady’s husband has recently been diagnosed with sciatica, and is suffering badly with it. The lady has to devote much care and assistance to her husband, including taking him to the hospital regularly.

• The lady’s children, who used to care for the dog, have now moved out of the home to go and live with their partners. The lady is too busy with her husband to be able to care for the dog.

• The dog, three years ago, growled at a toddler when the toddler approached the dog inside a caravan.

The lady tells you that the dog has lived like this for the past year. She has repeatedly thought about euthanasia, but has never been able to bring herself to request it. She appears to be fighting back tears when she tells you that the dog has “no quality of life”, and asks if you will put him to sleep.

The dog looks expressively at his upset owner, and at you. The 10 minutes allocated to the euthanasia have now passed, and your next client is waiting.

What should you do? (continue for answers)
Stakeholders and relevant considerations

• The dog

Quality vs. quantity of the dog’s life. The dog’s quality of life is likely to be poor, given the lack of attention and exercise. Would he be better off dead? Is this the only choice?

Discussion about the dog’s likely cause of aggression – a border collie in a confined situation with an unpredictable person (i.e. toddler) is highly likely to have displayed fear-motivated aggression - the classic breed in classic circumstances. Perhaps a brief mention of child safety around dogs, including the Blue Dog Project. Should the owner be directed to an accredited companion animal behaviour counsellor rather than have her pet euthanised?

Also mention the Dangerous Dogs Act and the owner’s liability if the dog should be declared ‘dangerously out of control’ and the aggravated offence if it actually bites someone.

• The owner

Do you believe the owner? Do you think this is a “killing of convenience”? Is she acting in the dog’s best interest? What are the implications of talking to the owner about alternatives to euthanasia? – she has obviously built herself up emotionally to be able to face bringing the dog to you.

She may not wish to re-home the dog, believing that no-one could provide the type of care that she would consider necessary.
Stakeholders and relevant considerations

• The vet

You want to ensure good animal welfare and preserve life if it will be a good life.

Does the owner have any other options? What about re-homing – e.g. to friends, or to a re-homing centre? Has she tried to re-home the dog? What policies do rescue centres have regarding potentially aggressive dogs? Should you, ethically, recommend that a potentially aggressive dog be re-homed? Could you be held liable if the owner or a new owner is prosecuted under DDA for a future offence?

What will be the implications for the dog and owner if you refuse euthanasia?

• The receptionist

Discussion about the need to allocate sufficient time to euthanasia consults. Not the receptionist’s fault, because there were no other consults available, but would a different day have been possible? Rushing euthanasia can be a source of stress for the vet, can result in the client not getting the necessary advice and emotional support, and can lead to complaints to VDS.
Relevant legislation and professional guidance

The owner has a duty of care to meet the five welfare needs under the Animal Welfare Act (2006) or the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act (2006) or the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) (2011). The Codes of Practice for the Welfare of Dogs, published to support the Acts, say that dogs kept outside should have companionship and interaction. This dog isn’t having these needs met.

Under the Dangerous Dogs Act (1991) as amended the owner, or person in charge (or both) of a dog dangerously out of control commits an offence and an aggravated offence if the dog actually bites a person or an Assistance Dog.

Euthanasia can be carried out by anyone (including the owner) provided that it is carried out humanely and does not cause unnecessary suffering. The owner couldn’t use pentobarbitone to euthanise her dog, under the Veterinary Medicines Regulations.

No veterinary surgeon is obliged to kill a healthy animal unless required to do so under statutory powers as part of their conditions of employment. To refuse euthanasia may add to the owner’s distress and could be deleterious to the welfare of the animal, but is permitted (RCVS Code of Professional Conduct for Veterinary Surgeons 2D 24 -25).

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What could be done in practice?

Be compassionate and explore all options. If euthanasia is decided upon as the most humane course of action, explain to the owner what will happen and give her options (e.g. to stay with dog or leave; home burial versus communal cremation versus individual cremation etc).
What could be done in policy?

This is fairly case-specific and doesn’t require a great deal of involvement at the political level. The BVA Ethics and Welfare Group has produced documents entitled “The role of the vet in treatment choice” and “Euthanasia” which offer further guidance.
About AWF

The Animal Welfare Foundation (AWF) aims to alleviate unnecessary pain and suffering in all animals including working and livestock animals, wildlife, and pets. We do this by focusing out charitable activities on three main areas:

- **Research**: Grant funding research which has a direct impact on animal welfare.
- **Education**: Investing in education for the public and veterinary professions, particularly students, on animal welfare issues.
- **Debate**: Providing a forum for discussion to highlight and promote animal welfare best practice.
Get involved in AWF

- Subscribe to our updates
- Host a talk and use our case studies
- Attend the Discussion Forum
- Take on the Vet School Challenge

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Thank you for taking part
For more information
www.animalwelfarefoundation.org.uk • 020 7908 6375 • @AWFVets