Forgotten Flopsy

An AWF Case Study

A CASE OF FAILING TO MEET THE DUTY OF CARE OF A PET RABBIT. POSSIBLY A CASE OF UNNECESSARY SUFFERING.

www.animalwelfarefoundation.org.uk
An obese rabbit “Flopsy” is brought into the surgery to have his nails cut by Mr and Mrs Green. The nails are so long that they are growing back into the rabbit’s pads, causing ulceration. You notice that his teeth are overgrown and his fur matted with faeces and urine underneath the abdomen. He is obviously not being cared for adequately.

On questioning, you discover the rabbit belongs to the couple’s 10–year-old son, Gavin, who has been going to boarding school for 2 years. The son cares for the rabbit when he is home and looks after it well during the school holidays. However, during Gavin’s absence the parents take little interest in Flopsy as they both work full time.

From the records, it is evident that Flopsy has been brought to the surgery for various minor problems over the last two years, indicating welfare problems related to husbandry. The Greens tell you that Gavin is devoted to Flopsy and would not part with him, and that they look after him as best as they can at present.

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

• Flopsy the rabbit

Welfare, assessed using the five welfare needs, is poor:

**Environment** - no information given, probably small hutch. 10% of pet rabbits in the UK live in a hutch that is smaller than the size recommended in the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) Code of Practice for the Welfare of Rabbits.

**Diet** - overgrown teeth suggest inadequate diet; probably muesli mix with insufficient hay;

**Behaviour** - no information given, but possibly in hutch in garden whilst Gavin away with little opportunity to express normal behaviour;

**Company** - no mention of a second rabbit. Social species kept in social isolation;

**Pain, suffering, injury and disease** - ulcerated pads because of overgrown nails. Likely urine scalding from urine stained fur. Overgrown teeth.
Stakeholders and relevant considerations

• Mr and Mrs Green
They take little interest in the rabbit, but look after him “as best as they can”.

• Gavin Green
Devoted to Flopsy, cares for him when he is at home.

• The vet
“...constant endeavour will be to ensure the welfare of the animals committed to my care.” RCVS declaration

“Make animal welfare your first consideration in seeking to provide the most appropriate attention for animals committed to your care.” RCVS Code of Professional Conduct for Veterinary Surgeons

• Veterinary nurse/practice team
Interest in animal welfare. Poor handling of case could negatively impact on practice morale.
Relevant legislation and professional guidance

Animal Welfare Act (2006) s. 9 or Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act (2006) s. 24 or The Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. All state that those responsible for animals have a legal duty of care to provide for the animal’s five welfare needs.

All also make unnecessary suffering an offence. If the parents had brought Flopsy in sooner, the nails could have been prevented from growing in to the pads.

Who has legal responsibility for the rabbit?

The parents have legal responsibility because they are responsible for the rabbit when Gavin is away. When Gavin is at home, the parents still have legal responsibility for the rabbit because the rabbit’s carer (Gavin) is under 16 years of age and they are responsible for him.

Gavin, as the animal’s owner, might be legally responsible for the rabbit, but it is unlikely that a 10-year-old would be prosecuted because of the bad publicity (and it is unlikely to be in the public interest). In a recent case a 15 year old daughter and father were both prosecuted for failing to get veterinary treatment for an injured cat. The father was found guilty, but the daughter was acquitted because she did what was “reasonable”, i.e. asked her father to go to the vets.

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What could be done in practice?

Options:

• Euthanasia – on clinical grounds or is it the easy way out?
• Rehome the rabbit – where?
• Educate the parents – how?
• Prosecute – via the RSPCA, Scottish SPCA or the Ulster SPCA.

Discussion of this case in previous years has suggested that the veterinary surgeon should be sensitive and listen to the details of the circumstances. They should demonstrate, using the clinical records that the rabbit is suffering from husbandry-associated medical conditions and should educate the clients about how these could be prevented and how the rabbit’s five welfare needs could be met. The Welsh Assembly Government has published a Code of Practice that might be useful although the other governments have not yet done so.

Ask for revisit after reasonable period to see if advice has been taken.

If they are unwilling to act on advice, or their attitude suggests this, explain the potential consequences of failing to meet the duty of care. If you feel it is indicated, call the appropriate welfare organisation (e.g. RSPCA) after discussing your concerns with the RCVS.
What could be done in practice?

Other options include:

**Pre-purchase consultations** or information evenings for prospective pet owners. Used as an opportunity to educate prospective owners about the duty of care and how it can be met. Offered free, can be used to get clients through the practice door and bonded to the practice.

**Becoming media trained** (e.g. BVA media course) so can contribute effectively to local print and broadcast media on issues of pet care and welfare. Opportunity to raise practice profile locally, so benefits to practice principals.

**Make use of educational material** provided by charities, e.g. Animal Welfare Foundation produces a range of animal care leaflets with a focus on animal welfare, PDSA provides information which helps people decide which pet might be best for them, then outlines five welfare needs for commonly kept species and how they can be met and RSPCA’s “Know Your Pet” section gives information on five welfare needs for commonly kept species.

**Raise your concerns with professional associations** e.g. BVA Ethics and Welfare Group, SPVS Welfare Group, BVZS. They are best placed to create policy.
What could be done in policy?

Working in companion animal practice, you may feel that rabbits are routinely failing to have their five welfare needs met and that is supported by the PDSA Animal Wellbeing Report. They are kept in hutches that are too small, on their own, with an inadequate diet, little to keep them stimulated and are often presented with diseases like flystrike (often linked to poor hygiene and/or diarrhoea) and dental disease (often linked to poor diet). A minority are vaccinated against myxomatosis and VHD. Often they are bought as a child’s pet and the novelty of ownership wears off.

Should you only concern yourself with treating these diseases as they arise, or should you contribute to efforts to improve the standard of rabbit health and welfare at the societal level? Can you, your practice, or your profession stop rabbit muesli-type mixes being sold? Can you stop hutches being sold that are too small? Should the approach be via legislation, education, or both?
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.
- **Debate**: Providing a forum for discussion to highlight and promote animal welfare best practice.
- **Education**: Investing in education for the public and veterinary professions, particularly students, on animal welfare issues.

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Thank you for taking part

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