Ninth Life?

An AWF Case Study

A CASE OF REFUSAL TO EUTHANISE A COMPANION ANIMAL ON VETERINARY ADVICE DUE TO EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENT.

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Mrs Smith, an elderly lady, has brought her geriatric cat “Tibby” to the surgery. You have diagnosed chronic renal failure and suggested it would be in the best interests of the cat to euthanise it. She is devastated and explains that the cat is her only link with her deceased husband. She promises to do anything and pay whatever it costs to prevent having to part with Tibby. You have every reason to believe her sincerity.

You sympathise with Mrs Smith’s wishes and know that palliative drug treatment (hospitalization, fluid therapy and drugs) will help for a short time. However, the laboratory results indicate that the renal failure is too far advanced for Tibby to live more than a few months at most and that intensive care will be necessary between relapses.

Additional information:

Mrs Smith lives on her own, is capable at the moment but arthritic and her sight is deteriorating. A home help comes in twice a week to do the tidying and shopping etc. Neighbours keep an eye on her but would not be able to look after her sick cat. Her son and his family live 50 miles away and visit most weekends but have dogs, which Tibby hates. She dotes on the cat and misses her husband (he died of bowel cancer).

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

• **Tibby the cat**

What is the cat’s quality of life? A cat with CRF has poor welfare due to lack of fitness. There may be repeat episodes of nausea, which causes the cat to feel unwell. The cat may not be eating well, losing weight, vomiting regularly. May be other disease states, e.g. senile dementia, neural dysfunction, leading to toileting around house, confusion, vocalising at night etc.

• **Mrs Smith**

Mrs Smith’s welfare needs to be considered, including her grief, expectations and disappointment.

• **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

RCVS Code of Professional Conduct for Veterinary Surgeons s. 8.8 states:

“Where a veterinary surgeon is concerned about an owner’s refusal to consent to euthanasia, veterinary surgeons can only advise their clients and act in accordance with their professional judgement. Where a veterinary surgeon is concerned that an animal’s welfare is compromised because of an owner’s refusal to allow euthanasia, a veterinary surgeon may take steps to resolve the situation, for example, an initial step could be to seek another veterinary opinion for the client, potentially by telephone.”

If you refuse to treat because in your professional opinion it would impair quality of life further, and she refuses euthanasia, she could be prosecuted under the Animal Welfare Act 2006, or the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006 or the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, for causing unnecessary suffering. She could be guilty of this offence because she would have failed to act when she would reasonably have known that the failure would have caused suffering (because the vet had informed her). Alternatively all the Acts include a ‘duty of care’ expressed as the animal’s five welfare needs which include the need to protect a pet from pain, suffering, injury and disease.
What could be done in practice?

Options:

• Insist on euthanasia, upsetting Mrs Smith
• Seek a second opinion, though the case is fairly straightforward
• Admit the cat for intensive care treatment

Previous discussions of this case have highlighted the need to be sensitive and to actively listen to Mrs Smith. The blood results can be used to demonstrate the severity of the condition. Costs associated with repeat hospitalisation and treatment should be discussed. Ensure she is aware of all relevant aspects, e.g. that death from the condition is sadly inevitable and she can prevent further suffering rather than prolonging it by consenting to euthanasia. Try to reach mutual agreement on the cat’s quality of life.

One palliative session might be viewed as a compromise. Could say that if relapses soon (specify how long would be acceptable), wouldn’t be in cat’s interest to repeat and you would therefore be unwilling to repeat. Consenting to one palliative session also gives her time to consider and accept what she has been told.

Some clients may ask about kidney transplants. The procedure has not yet been performed in the UK although it is done in the US. There are significant issues about the legality of acquiring the organ to be transplanted and it is possible that unnecessary suffering could be caused to the donor. The recipient is also likely to require long term treatment and care to monitor and prevent rejection of the transplanted kidney and this may also affect the recipient’s welfare.

If she refuses euthanasia, and you refuse a second treatment, you could discuss your concerns with RCVS then potentially report her to the appropriate animal welfare organisation (e.g. RSPCA). This would be undesirable given the difficulties of her personal situation.
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.

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