

Are we going too far – and too fast?



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Overtreatment – a treatment that results in a poorer quality of life than no treatment or euthanasia; a treatment that is chosen in favour of a cheaper, but equally effective, treatment; or a treatment or test that makes no difference to the animal's condition or quality of life (Corr, 2013).

'One health' – an approach to designing and implementing programmes, policies, legislation and research in which multiple sectors communicate and work together to achieve better public health outcomes particularly in ensuring food safety, controlling zoonotic diseases and combatting antibiotic resistance (World Health Organisation, 2018).



OVERTREATMENT

The questions “Are we going too far?” and “We can, but should we?” in reference to ‘overtreating’ companion animals with potentially curable diseases (Jarvis, 2010; Clark, 2015; Yeates, 2016); or in the palliation of incurable conditions (Flecknell et al, 2016) are being asked with increasing frequency, indicating a widening ethical concern within the veterinary profession.

The questions were posed most recently (12 June 2018) at the BVA Animal Welfare Foundation (Anon, 2018) in the form, “Is insurance compromising quality of life?” Typically, then – as on previous occasions – a definitive conclusion was not reached, prompting Taylor and colleagues (2018) to complain that, “everyone skirted around the elephant in the room” and opine, “that overtreatment of animals, whether funded by insurance or not, is inhumane and unethical”.

This opinion, which upholds the view that we are going too far, is supported by this author, and is gathering currency with other veterinary professionals and animal owners (see Acknowledgments).

Dubious justification

It is not difficult to see why some veterinary surgeons, oncologists, intensivists and those practising palliative animal care may tend to go too far. Clients who view their pets as family members and can pay – or whose animals are adequately insured – will find such ‘specialists’ without difficulty. Such specialists will then defend their actions on the grounds that, “It’s what the client wants”.

This so-called rationale runs counter to the *Code of Professional Conduct for Veterinary Surgeons* (RCVS, 2018), which states that all members of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) must, ‘...above all, ensure the health and welfare of animals committed to their care’. This statement in turn may be used by specialists to argue that if an animal’s death is inevitable, then any ‘last ditch’ attempt to preserve life is justified. This argument is flawed – because health and welfare priorities are independent of longevity.

Specialists may also argue that whilst overtreatment may, or may not, benefit a given case, its practice may advance the veterinary profession for the benefit of animals in general. This may be true for some experimental procedures; for others it is wishful thinking.

Applying tenuous interpretations of the World Health Organisation’s ‘One Health’ mission statement (see glossary above), some specialists claim that lessons learned from what many would regard as veterinary overtreatment will even benefit human medicine. What is undeniable is that in overtreating animals, veterinary specialists will acquire additional skills and take a professional fee. Some may publicise their activities in the media or through academic publications, gaining a form of acclaim – or notoriety, depending on one’s perspective – and academic progression.

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