

Ethics: A matter of opinion?

By Julia McCall, DVM



Dr. Julia McCall

“In ethics, as in any other area, people’s perceptions to a great extent reflect their training.”

-Bernard Rollin¹

The philosopher Bernard Rollin states that “detecting ethical questions is, in some ways, like detecting lameness.” (Rollin, p.32) We intuitively know that something is amiss,

but the ability to identify the problem requires training. Why then, are our responses as veterinarians to ethical dilemmas frequently described as impulsive or intuitive? Why do both veterinarians and clients commonly default to describing ethics as “a matter of opinion” when conflict arises?

Research demonstrates that most people do not reason when making moral judgments, but rely instead upon subconscious biases and emotion. The intuitive response of knowing something is wrong is essential—it prompts us to pause and reconsider. However, it is by moving beyond reconsideration to analysis of our initial reaction that we arrive at a sound final decision and a coherent plan for its implementation.

Whether discussing our decision with clients, refusing to provide a particular service or resisting a cultural norm at a practice, our position is strengthened by a cogent thought process. It’s not that our gut response or instinct is unimportant; it is just that when we stop there, we deny ourselves a thorough inquiry and, in so doing, reduce our effectiveness. When others disagree with our final decision—particularly if it declines their request—they cannot dismiss a rational response with the same ease with which they dismiss a reactive response.

Rollin states that according to some estimates, veterinarians spend nearly one-third of their time attending to ethical issues. (Rollin, p.31) That thought alone may inspire us to reframe our approach to ethical considerations. He offers the following questions (Rollin, p.38) as a starting point to guide ethical inquiry:

1. Does the situation confronted require that judgments be made regarding good and bad or right and wrong?
2. Does the situation raise options that appear problematic (i.e., lying or concealing facts)?

3. Does the situation pit the welfare of humans against the welfare of animals?
4. Does a conflict exist between obligations to oneself and other obligations in the case?
5. Are veterinarians being asked to violate any principles that they hold (i.e., to cause no harm, to relieve suffering)?
6. Does something feel “not right” about a choice being contemplated?

Ambiguous situations in which there is no clear law to lean on are complex. There is a spectrum of response that can be considered rational, so equally valid defenses exist for differing responses. Examples include euthanasia, pre-purchase exams and the conflicts that arise as client versus patient interests on emergency calls.

The art of ethical reasoning lies in selecting which moral principles—the premises which we concede—to apply to the situation or the conflict being assessed. Examples of moral principles include choosing the greatest good for the greatest number of people or animals (utilitarianism); treating others as we wish to be treated (“the Golden Rule”); the idea that animals have their own lives as creatures and, thus, a moral status distinct from their legal status as property (intrinsic value); honesty (adherence to the veterinary oath); and truth (in its simplest form: the common agreement that lying is wrong).

Selecting principles that further an objective assessment of the situation rather than principles that support a pre-supposed position or a desired outcome, and questioning our motives every step of the way, constitutes solid ethical reasoning.

Practical ethical dilemmas often do not hinge upon assessing a situation, but upon standing for what is obviously right amidst a myriad of competing forces (client or employer pressures, practice culture, finances and competition). In these instances, having a clear process upon which to rely on while determining our actions is essential.

An example of the type of practical dilemma that a younger practitioner may face is pressure from a client or a practice to participate in insurance fraud, an activity that we all agree is both wrong and illegal. Applying Rollin’s questions while considering their response may

continued on next page

