

# Difficult decisions

Promoting kindness and preventing suffering isn't as straightforward as it may seem; the RSPCA has to grapple with a number of ethical dilemmas on a daily basis.

**I**f you can't please all of the people, all of the time, is it ever possible to help all of the animals, all of the time? Sadly not, as in reality few animal welfare issues have simple solutions. Consequently this means plenty of challenging debates and, ultimately, tough decisions have to be made.

Dilemmas include making complex judgements about an animal's future quality of life when considering whether to use or endorse new high-tech veterinary treatment for pets such as organ transplants, cancer therapy or the use of artificial limbs and prosthetics. Or the priority with which our busy inspectors should deal with incidents or complaints involving animals not currently protected by welfare laws, such as crabs and lobsters, or spiders such as tarantulas.

## Key dilemma

One key dilemma for anyone who cares about animals, is whether or when it is acceptable for one individual or group of animals to be harmed – or even killed – for the benefit of others. Barney Reed, one of our animal welfare scientists, comments: "In order to make practical progress, we realise that our idealism may have to be tempered by pragmatic realism."

Take vaccination, for example, a subject *animalife* explored in summer 2008. We all know that vaccination against disease protects millions of our animals from suffering, and sometimes death. The RSPCA itself is a major consumer of veterinary vaccines (along with other products such as medicines and flea treatments) and strongly encourages pet owners to make the trip to the vets, for their pets' jabs. However, there is also a direct animal welfare cost to this – the vaccines must be tested for safety and effectiveness before they can be given to our pets, farm animals or wildlife and currently these tests can involve causing significant

pain and distress to other animals in laboratories. This is a major dilemma.

The implementation of the 3Rs – replacement, refinement and reduction of animals used in research – can help to resolve this. Our research animals team works with regulators and companies involved in producing vaccines to try to speed this up, but sadly animals will continue to be used for the foreseeable future.

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**Welfare cost: Behind every successful vaccine is a research animal.**



**Feeding time: For animals in our care this often means other animals.**

### Wild animals

The RSPCA has four wildlife centres that treat an amazing variety of wild animals. We have a clear responsibility to ensure that the methods we use to rehabilitate injured animals are the most effective, give the animals the best chance of survival, and most importantly, don't actually do more harm than good!

In the course of treating animals, our wildlife staff collect lots of important information that can be used to help identify the most successful rehabilitation methods. We continue to learn and improve the methods people use for future wildlife casualties, thanks to the data collected from the tracking tags and collars that are sometimes attached to the animals we release (such as bats, hedgehogs and polecats) to monitor their progress. But the fitting and carrying of these devices, and other methods we could employ, may themselves have a potential impact on the animals involved, so their use must be given very careful consideration by our vets and expert care staff.

While in our care we also need to feed wild animals the sort of diet they would naturally eat. This sometimes means using some animals as food for others. Seals are fed a diet of commercially caught fish, while predators such as birds of prey, snakes and foxes, are given culled male chicks. These come from the farming industry where they are considered to have no other practical 'purpose'. Products from farmed animals



also end up in the pet food we give to the dogs and cats in our animal centres, and no doubt the food you buy for your pets. We all have a responsibility to these farmed animals too. In the same way that Freedom Food is promoted as a higher welfare alternative for human consumers of meat products, we are lobbying the pet food industry towards only using ingredients from those animals farmed to 'higher welfare' standards – but there's a very long way to go before this is achieved.

### Long-term benefits

Sometimes society engages in activities that are not primarily in the best interests of individual animals, but are generally considered to be beneficial and desirable. It is highly unlikely that cats and dogs would volunteer to be neutered, but such programmes, undertaken by animal organisations all around the world, can play a very important role in helping to prevent large numbers of unwanted and homeless animals in the future.

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### Protecting animals

When trying to influence animal welfare legislation, common sense and practical experience will only get you so far. Ultimately it is scientific evidence that carries the most weight. This means that animals will usually only receive protection by law when it is proven that certain situations or procedures cause them pain or distress. This in itself is a dilemma as the research necessary to provide this evidence will usually involve somebody undertaking studies (such as those recently used to show that fish are capable of feeling pain) which, by their nature, cause animals to suffer. However, as a result of animal welfare organisations finding out about such studies and using this evidence when arguing for improvements to the laws protecting animals, millions worldwide may ultimately benefit.

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Barney concludes: "It is important that we strive to identify where negative impacts on any animals may arise and make sure everyone involved acknowledges the difficult dilemmas. Then we work hard to critically review the situation and implement practical steps to avoid or minimise any negative impact for animals as far as possible."