



price of protection

The RSPCA protects and cares for a broad range of animals, but fulfilling these responsibilities is not always straightforward. Senior scientific officer Jane Cooper of the RSPCA's research animals team explains.

Acting to protect specific groups of animals can sometimes mean causing suffering in others – leading to difficult decisions for the RSPCA. One area where this is most pertinent is the widespread use of veterinary vaccines that protect millions of animals against common – often life-threatening – diseases. The RSPCA encourages vaccination as it can have tremendous benefits for animal health and welfare, yet vaccines cannot be used (in animals or humans) until they have been subjected to a whole series of tests. Many of these tests are carried out on animals and can cause them considerable suffering. This presents a serious ethical dilemma for the RSPCA and for caring animal owners.

Widespread vaccination of pet animals means that some diseases that were once relatively common are no longer a major problem. Parvovirus killed a large number of dogs in the UK during the 1970s – nowadays puppies are routinely vaccinated against this disease and are protected from its devastating effects.

Thanks to rabies vaccines, many dogs and cats can now be taken abroad and returned to the UK without fear of contracting the killer disease or having to spend long periods in quarantine. In Africa, where rabies kills thousands of people every year, vaccinating feral dogs against rabies is helping to save not only their lives but also those of the people they come into contact with.

Vaccines are also used to safeguard farm animals against diseases that can lead to pneumonia, miscarriage, severe diarrhoea and even death. Farm animal vaccines also protect humans from contracting dangerous diseases – for example, hens may be vaccinated against Salmonella to prevent humans suffering from food poisoning after eating eggs.

The RSPCA believes it is essential that animals are vaccinated to protect them, and other animals they may come into contact with, from diseases. Animal owners have a duty to protect their animals by ensuring that vaccinations are given according to the programme recommended by their vet.



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Testing times

People expect veterinary medicines to be effective and safe, free from unexpected distressing reactions, and harmless in the event of an accidental overdose. All medicines are extensively tested when they are being developed, but vaccines are different from other medicines in that they are manufactured using living bacteria or viruses, rather than by combining chemicals. This means that they can vary slightly from batch to batch, yet each batch must be as safe and as effective as the next.

Consequently manufacturers are required to test every vaccine batch before it can be used. Unfortunately, many of these tests involve animals and some can cause considerable suffering, especially those that are testing vaccines against serious diseases such as rabies. This is the dilemma we all face if we wish to continue keeping animals as companions, farming them or, in some cases, protecting specific populations of wild animals against diseases.

Facing up

The RSPCA believes that addressing this dilemma is an essential part of our work as a responsible animal welfare organisation that cares for laboratory animals as well as companion, farmed, and wild animals. In the first instance it is important to question the necessity of all vaccine tests that cause animal suffering. For each test that is

essential, every effort should be made to develop alternative ways of testing that do not involve animals. In the meantime, while alternatives are being developed, all possible steps should be taken to reduce both the numbers of animals used and the amount of suffering they experience.

What are we doing?

The RSPCA is extremely concerned about the suffering of animals in vaccine tests and believes that more could and should be done to reduce the dilemma. Ultimately the RSPCA wants all vaccine tests that use animals to be replaced with non-animal methods. Unfortunately this is not currently possible in those cases where there are scientific obstacles to developing appropriate alternative methods. However, even where tests cannot be replaced immediately, there is often scope to reduce the numbers and suffering of animals used.

A major recent RSPCA initiative in this area is the production of a technical report, *Advancing animal welfare and the 3Rs in the batch testing of veterinary vaccines*, which highlights where action is most urgently required. The report takes a critical look at testing requirements for veterinary vaccines and is aimed at regulators, policy makers and vaccine manufacturers. Its recommendations will have a significant impact on the numbers and suffering of animals used if they are taken forward by the relevant bodies.

The report recommends that:

- some tests are unnecessary and should be discontinued
- the process of incorporating more humane tests into the regulations should be speeded up
- research efforts should focus on replacing or changing tests that involve lethal infections, to reduce the suffering of those animals involved.

What happens next?

The report has recently been sent to those in a position to make decisions and make a difference in this area and we will be following up their actions.

In the meantime we hope that animal owners will continue to protect their pets from diseases, but will also spare a thought for the animals used in vaccine testing and continue to support the RSPCA so that we can continue our valuable work to help them.

Hens may be vaccinated to make eggs safe to eat.



You can find the full report by logging on to: www.rspca.org.uk/vaccines