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Veterinary Record Research Comment

Conscientious objection to canine pregnancy termination among veterinary surgeons

The ethical and legal aspects of pregnancy termination in humans have been the subject of intense debate and scholarship over the years. However, these aspects have been discussed comparatively little in the context of pregnancy termination in companion animals such as dogs.

Terminating pregnancy in dogs by medical or surgical methods is a procedure that provokes ethical deliberation by those involved in providing veterinary healthcare. Inevitably, routine neutering of cats and dogs will involve some cases where there is a pre-existing pregnancy, often at an early stage, and these can be performed as standard spays. However, if the pregnancy is more advanced, it could be argued that this presents more of an ethical dilemma for the veterinary professionals involved. On the other hand, previous studies reporting canine pregnancy termination have merely reported the surgical technique involved¹ or how to prevent fetal suffering post-spay in pregnant females² without exploring other ethical dimensions of these procedures.

To help address this knowledge gap, a study by Özen and colleagues,³ summarised on p112 of this issue of *Vet Record*, explored Turkish veterinarians' opinions on pregnancy termination in dogs and their preferred cut-off points for termination. Participants' reasons for refusing to carry out pregnancy termination were varied, but often based on religious beliefs. Their personal cut-off points were similarly varied, with stated cut offs including the possibility of pregnancy, implantation, the presence of a heartbeat and the viability of the fetuses.³

Interestingly, the demands of the animal owner and the obligations of the workplace were given as reasons for performing pregnancy termination, even when this contradicted personal beliefs. Indeed, the authors speculate whether the owners' demands for termination offer a neat solution to the ethical deliberation that may accompany such requests, suggesting that placing emphasis on the autonomy of the owner to justify the spaying of pregnant animals avoids the need to confront the ethical question of the 'rightness' of the procedure.³

However, there are a few areas where Özen and colleagues' study is relatively silent; namely the effects of conscientious objection by the veterinary surgeons involved and the procedure followed in situations where the owner is unaware of their animal's pregnancy.

Conscientious objection to lawful procedures is a well-established protocol in human medical practice that is derived from an individual's ethical decision to decline to participate in specific procedures or a procedure in a particular patient.⁴

This ethical stance has not been discussed as widely in veterinary practice, although it has been described in relation to the use of animals in veterinary teaching,⁵ and it is included in the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons' Codes of Professional Conduct (Supporting Guidance).⁶

Nevertheless, some veterinary procedures are likely to evoke this type of ethical deliberation, for example, economic euthanasia of companion animals, non-therapeutic firing of tendons in horses and, of course, termination of pregnancy.

In the paper by Özen and colleagues, participants' reporting of their objection to performing pregnancy terminations, either at any stage or beyond a defined cut-off point,³ suggests that they were exercising their right to conscientious objection, although it was not labelled as such. This finding also leads to speculation about the effects that veterinarians' refusal to perform a termination may have on the animal owners and the animals themselves. However, this aspect was not considered as part of the study.

In the human medical field, professional guidance for doctors and, in many countries, common law require objectors to refer patients to another provider, locating this responsibility to refer under the rubric of the duty to care.⁷

For veterinary professionals in the UK, the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons' guidance on conscientious objection requires that the objection is reasonable in all circumstances and that animal welfare is not compromised, that alternative arrangements are made for the animal or that the client has enough information to seek assistance from another veterinary surgeon, and that objectors inform their employers and colleagues at an early opportunity so that patient care is not compromised and others are not overburdened.⁶

However, in Özen and colleagues' study,³ there is no reporting of what happened to those cases where pregnancy termination was refused. If the owner is told that their preferred veterinary surgeon will not perform the procedure, where else can they look to have it performed? Inevitably, there will be some veterinary surgeons who will perform it. Indeed, some participants in Özen and colleagues' study said that they would perform the procedure, even if they disapproved, due to owner or workplace pressure.³

This is similar to the findings of a study by Yeates and Main,⁸ which found that the reasons for veterinary surgeons going ahead with euthanasia that they would have liked to refuse to perform included pressure from employers, worry that the owner would just abandon the animal and even compassion for the owner, who had at least brought the animal to a veterinary practice.

Of course, in the pregnancy termination scenario, we are not talking about specific euthanasia of the fetuses, as it typically occurs as a side effect of the spaying procedure. Indeed the American Veterinary Medical Association Guidelines for the Euthanasia of Animals 2020 state that ‘...ligation of the uterine blood vessels with retention of the fetuses inside the uterus will result in death of the fetuses’.⁹ However, if the uterus is opened, then each fetus needs to be individually euthanased.

Many aspects of veterinarians’ ethical decision making concerning the termination of canine pregnancies mirror those of human medical professionals involved in pregnancy termination. However, the legal status of animals as property in most countries means that, by emphasising the autonomy of the owner to justify the spaying of pregnant animals, veterinarians may avoid the need to confront complex ethical issues

There is another interesting aspect to this scenario, and that is informed consent. The study by Özen and colleagues³ suggests that, in the scenarios described by participants, the owners are fully aware that their dogs are pregnant. However, consider the situation of an owner who has booked their animal in for spaying without realising that she is pregnant. Ethically, the owner has a right to be informed if a pregnancy is discovered. The notion of informed consent would require the procedure to be paused while the client is updated on the pregnancy and asked for their consent to continue with the procedure and to terminate the pregnancy. After all, the owner has merely given consent for a routine spay, and as Rollin points out, ‘a spay is not an abortion.’¹⁰ Indeed, Rollin comments on this when reflecting on the choices to be made when faced with a dog brought in for a spay that is subsequently found to be pregnant. The decision not to inform the owner and proceed with the spay seems to be the worst decision of the four that he presents, both in terms of irrevocability and the potential for owner distress.¹⁰ However, we must be realistic about what currently happens in veterinary practices, with the focus on responsible ownership and the collective drive to neuter any animals that are not wanted for breeding.

Therefore, as in many animal-related ethical scenarios, we are left with a choice. We can elect to offer some moral rights to animals from an early stage of their lives, as we believe, in common with some of Özen and colleagues’ study participants,³ that they have a right to life, or we can ensure that we maximise the welfare of any animals to whom we provide care, which might include decisions to end their lives. However, these decisions need to be made in consultation with the owners who are responsible for these animals, rather than being taken solely by the individuals performing the surgery in an attempt to do what they feel is best for the animal and for wider society.

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What you need to know:

- **The ethical aspects of human pregnancy termination have been much debated, but there has been comparatively little discussion of the ethical issues associated with pregnancy termination in companion animals.**
- **A recent study evaluating Turkish veterinarians' opinions on the termination of unwanted pregnancies in dogs suggests that some veterinarians are exercising their right to conscientious objection, with reported reasons for refusal to perform this procedure including the possibility of pregnancy, the presence of a heartbeat and the viability of the fetuses.**

- **However, some veterinarians performed the procedure even though it went against their personal beliefs. The reasons given for this included the demands of the animal owner and institutional/workplace requirements.**
- **Although conscientious objection and its sequelae are not specifically addressed in the research paper, thought needs to be given to what happens to the animal and the owner in the face of refusal to perform pregnancy termination.**
- **In addition, the issue of informed consent must be considered when dealing with cases of unsuspected pregnancy in patients booked in for a routine spay. Decisions on whether to proceed with the spay need to be made in consultation with the animals' owners rather than being taken solely by the individuals performing the surgery**