



VCNZ Update

VETERINARY COUNCIL
OF NEW ZEALAND
Te Kaunihera Rata Kararehe o Aotearoa

Can doctors and dentists perform procedures on animals?

by Helen Beban, Professional Adviser, Veterinary Council of New Zealand

You have a client whose dog has broken the crown of its lower right canine. The pulp cavity has been exposed. You explain to your client that, although the tooth is unlikely to be causing pain at present, a tooth root abscess will form at some point in the future. These are painful and are not easy to diagnose as there is often no obvious swelling or discharge. This chronic infection can lead to progressive kidney, liver and heart complications and shorten the dog's life. You discuss removing the mandibular canine tooth in dogs, including the risk of jaw fracture. You discuss the option of monitoring the dog and making a decision to remove the tooth when it becomes obvious that a tooth root abscess has occurred. At this stage, the tooth will be easier to remove.

However, the dog is a show dog and the owner is keen to preserve the tooth. You talk about the possibility of root canal work to preserve the tooth. You explain you do not have the expertise to do this and there are no veterinarians in the area that you know of who do this work. The client asks if a dentist could do this. You know the dentist nearby and offer to discuss this with him.

He is willing to perform root canal work on the tooth to sterilise and seal the root canal. Can you go ahead and arrange this?

- There are several things to consider.
- What are your obligations under the Code of Professional Conduct as the primary care veterinarian under these circumstances?
 - Who will be responsible for any follow-up care? Who will be responsible if things go wrong?
 - Will you be covered by your insurer?
 - Will the dentist be covered by his insurer?
 - Is there a legal basis for a human dentist to carry out a surgical procedure on a dog?
 - Are there any considerations under the Animal Welfare Act 1999?

This was a real-life case. The Veterinary Council of New Zealand sought comment from the Medical Council, Ministry for Primary Industries Animal Welfare Group and Veterinary Professional Insurance Society in responding to the veterinarian concerned. These considerations were used to draft the Policy on Human Health Practitioners Undertaking Surgical



Procedures on Animals, which is available on the VCNZ website:

<http://tinyurl.com/mx8flc8>

Key points

1. You consider that the procedure is in the animal's best interests and can be justified on animal welfare grounds. It must not be done for purely cosmetic reasons or for the convenience of the owner.
2. You don't have the skills to do the procedure and there are no veterinary referral options.
3. You consider the dentist has the necessary skills and equipment to do the procedure. You should document discussions with the dentist and your advice in regard to the size of the roots of mandibular canine teeth; whether the human dental equipment would be suitable and so on.
4. All parties are aware that there is unlikely to be insurance cover in the event of adverse outcomes.
5. You, as the primary care veterinarian, are responsible for the whole procedure and aftercare and maintain direct and observed supervision of the procedure.
6. The owner is aware of the risks, the expected outcomes and the costs. It would be prudent to have a meeting with the owner and the dentist and to fully document the discussion. This documentation should be reviewed by the owner and then all parties should sign this. Your clinical notes should document how and why you made the judgement to offer the procedure and should be clear that the owner has made the decision to accept your recommendation in an environment of informed choice. This process ensures you have established informed consent. So should you even recommend this course of action? As with most situations, it comes down to the individual case and your professional judgement given in an environment of informed choice and informed consent. ■