



Emergency services – animal welfare is paramount

What does a veterinarian do with a severely sick or injured animal for which there is no identifiable owner, or when the owner is unwilling or unable to pay? VCNZ's **Wayne Ricketts** and Massey University's **Stuart Gordon** outline the obligations.

JUST BEFORE CHRISTMAS, an SPCA employee contacted VCNZ about a veterinary practice that had referred a badly injured kitten presented to it by a member of the public. The kitten, which had been struck by a car, had severe thoracic injuries causing respiratory distress, and was no doubt in significant pain. The lack of a microchip or identifiable owner was the reason for the referral to the SPCA. No first aid or analgesia was administered by the referring practice. This is ethically unacceptable and potentially violates the *Code of Professional Conduct* (CPC). Essential first aid should have been given by the referring practice.

The SPCA advises that it is seeing more cases of severely sick, injured and even terminal animals being referred to it by veterinarians that should have been euthanased (under section 138 of the Animal Welfare Act), or at least given first aid and pain relief before being picked up by an inspector. Keeping a dog with a painful condition overnight in a cage without any assessment and pain relief could amount to professional misconduct.

The CPC states that veterinarians are obliged to attend to the welfare needs of animals even if the owners identify that they have financial constraints, the clients have a poor credit history or there is no identifiable owner (as in the above case). This does not, however, commit the veterinarian to treatment beyond ensuring that an animal is relieved of unreasonable pain or distress. After conducting the initial assessment and providing first aid, the owner should be informed of the

presenting problem(s), the treatment options available and the likely costs involved. If the owner is unwilling to accept further essential treatment, then the option of euthanasia should be discussed. If the owner isn't known, contact with the SPCA regarding a referral should only be done after first aid has been administered.

Veterinary practices are businesses and must remain viable, but veterinarians who work in those businesses also have professional obligations. A litmus test should be applied here: what would this look like on the front page of the local newspaper, or could I justify my actions to my peers at a regional branch meeting? The reality is that all veterinarians will see these types of cases, and sometimes a practice will have to absorb the cost of this first aid care.

What else does the CPC say about emergency service? Firstly, a veterinarian in clinical practice is obliged to "make available" emergency services at all times in order to provide relief to any animal suffering pain or distress, unless they are able to refer owners to an alternative veterinary emergency service. After-hours services may be provided by the veterinarian/clinic, shared with another practice or provided by an after-hours clinic. The emergency service must be sufficiently resourced so that clients' animals are attended to in reasonable time to ensure the welfare of the animals. A decision on what is a reasonable time will take into account the type of practice and the locality. There is no set timeframe for accessing emergency after-hours services.

A veterinarian on duty and directly responsible for providing an emergency service can refer a non-client to the emergency service provided by their own veterinarian. However, if that alternative service is not available, and if the veterinarian has the necessary skills and resources required for the particular emergency, the veterinarian must attend the emergency and provide essential treatment to the animal.

A veterinarian's involvement in an emergency should be tailored according to their level of competence and the resources available to deal with the particular situation. If the clinical skills required in this situation fall outside the veterinarian's competence, this must be identified to the client and details of an alternative veterinary emergency service provider offered.

The Council acknowledges that there may be circumstances when a duty veterinarian may be prevented or delayed from attending to an emergency. These may include occasions when the veterinarian is already overloaded with higher-priority emergency cases, or if the veterinarian becomes incapacitated through injury, sickness or excessive fatigue. In this case the veterinarian is obliged to assist the affected client to access an alternative veterinary service.

Finally, it is important to consider any potential personal risks involved when attending to a veterinary emergency. There is no expectation that veterinarians should place their personal safety at risk at any time. ⁽⁹⁸⁾