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The veterinary nurse's role in helping tackle the most difficult animal welfare challenges

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The RSPCA is the oldest charity in the UK. It was founded in 1824 (so officially before the police). It was originally founded primarily in order to campaign to change the law relating to animal welfare and once enacted, to enforce animal welfare legislation and to educate the public on animal welfare. It now operates around 40 veterinary clinics and around 200 animal centres and rehoming branches across England and Wales, as well as engaging in educational, campaigning, and inspectorate work.

This article considers some of the issues the RSPCA faces, how veterinary nurses are involved – and how greater involvement could help to tackle some of the more serious challenges to animal welfare.

Genuine rescue

The RSPCA rescues – and I mean really *rescues* – animals from horrible situations. These are rarely relinquishments of otherwise well-cared-for dogs. This is one of the things that makes me most proud to be part of the RSPCA: we are helping the most needy (as well as the greatest number) of animals. However, this does create additional challenges for us in comparison with other welfare charities, which can control their intake, both in terms of numbers and in terms of selecting which animals they take in.

By comparison, the RSPCA cannot discriminate. First, the animals we see are in dire and urgent need to escape from their extreme situations. They cannot be left where they are, and we cannot leave these animals for another charity or organisation to deal with. This means we cannot control our intake of those animals, making it harder to manage our resources. Second, these animals have experienced a

range of abuse and neglect, often for considerable periods of time and with severe, cumulative effects. This makes them especially difficult to rehabilitate, and, in some cases, harder to rehome.

These animals need specialist, compassionate and patient skill as well as additional resources. They often need longer to rehabilitate and need veterinary care for chronic, untreated conditions. Some animals are so severely maltreated that the best welfare outcome for them is euthanasia. This can result in criticism of our 'high' (still under the national average) euthanasia rates, even though animals are only ever euthanased in their own interests.

These animals can also be more difficult to rehome: some breeds have particularly bad reputations which can be fostered by alarmist coverage in the media, while others may have particular needs, requiring specialist, patient and compassionate owners. Helping these animals is one area in which veterinary nurses can really help us, as volunteers, fosterers and rehomers. Nurses have the specialist knowledge, compassion and patience to care for these animals, and can work miracles in many cases.

Range of work

Another issue is the scope of our operation. As our name suggests, we help all animals: pet dogs, feral cats, working horses, pet rabbits, pet exotics, broilers, circus elephants, laboratory rats, wild seals, foxes, hedgehogs – everything. It is very impressive but all that work takes resources! We have a large army of fantastic volunteers, but animals still need food, accommodation and veterinary care. All this costs money (although we do get

donations and some altruistic practices do work for subsidised rates or for free). And resources are limited – which is why *pro bono* veterinary work is so important.

The sheer range of animals in need makes it difficult to prioritise resources. Other charities can focus on one species. We cannot, and anything we do to help one animal uses resources that cannot be spent on others. This becomes even more of a problem when the public have unrealistic expectations. Individual members of the public may think only of a single case, or specific issue, and expect that to be our highest priority, when we are simultaneously dealing with, and helping millions of other animals. In fact even a small minority of our veterinary colleagues in general practice appear to think that they have a right to expect the RSPCA to fund whatever work may be considered necessary for a particular patient – and get annoyed if we do not. The reality is that any money that we spend on veterinary care is money that cannot be spent on other welfare work. So any help that veterinary practices can give will help to free up resources and in fact, it can free up far *more* resources than it costs the practice. This means that veterinary nurses and surgeons are in a great position to give significant valuable support to the RSPCA.

Progressing animal welfare

The RSPCA has enormous public recognition and support, and this support is particularly strong for our prosecution work. The Society wants to ensure that animal abuse is not permitted, that those responsible are held to account, and that the animal victims are rescued. Nevertheless, our role in prosecutions generates some criticism, not least from people who are prosecuted or who want to continue their illegal activities. Some people may then unfairly label prosecutions as ‘political’ even though the Society is enforcing a law that has been passed by Parliament, which government agencies often leave to the RSPCA to address (Wooler, 2014). Any decisions to prosecute are based on the public interest (e.g. whether there are other ways to protect the animal’s welfare) and the evidence in the particular case.

We also get criticism for our campaigns, in particular from people who want to continue an activity against which we are campaigning. In spite of this our campaigns receive major public support (including those against badger culls, fox hunting and slaughter without stunning). Nevertheless, this leads to challenges for the charity.

Nurse support

These challenges make nurse support even more important. Vital roles that RVN’s can and do undertake include:

- providing professional volunteer support as nurses, for example by volunteering as a nurse in a neutering clinic
- providing volunteer support as experts in animal welfare and health, for example by volunteering in an animal centre
- supporting the RSPCA publically, especially through fundraising

Thank you very much for everything you have done already for all animals and for anything you will do in the future. Helping the RSPCA is the best way to help the animals most in need – and it’s where nursing skills and expertise are vital!

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Reference

Wooler, S. 2014. The independent review of the prosecution activity of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Available at <http://www.rspca.org.uk/webContent/staticimages/Downloads/WoolerReviewFinalSept2014.pdf>. Last accessed 6th November 2015.



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