



Sarah Bolton BA (Hons) DipAVN (small animal) ISFM CertFN A1 RVN

Sarah began nursing in 2002 in mixed practice and qualified in 2006. Sarah completed the Advanced Veterinary Nurse Diploma in 2015 at Harper Adams University and hopes to top this up to degree level. Sarah has most recently gained the ISFM Certificate in Feline Friendly Nursing. Her interests include medical and surgical nursing, wound management, anaesthesia, feline nursing, laboratory techniques and veterinary nurse training.
Email: sarahboltonuk@btinternet.com

Critical incident analysis – a reflection

Sarah Bolton BA (Hons) DipAVN (small animal) ISFM CertFN A1 RVN

Treforest Veterinary Clinic, 16 River Street, Treforest, Pontypridd CF37 1TD, UK

ABSTRACT: The ability to reflect upon an event allows the individual to consider their actions and consequences. The use of a model of reflection can help guide the individual through a structured process of contemplation. Difficult decisions and dilemmas are something that the veterinary profession deal with on a daily basis. The ability to reflect is a skill that can be implemented throughout the individual's professional life. Professional practice, legal implications and ethical considerations were evaluated and considered concerning a critical incident.

Introduction

A critical incident is one such event that causes us to ponder over our actions. It is an event that we spend a lot of time analysing and wondering if we could have done things differently. Reflection of a critical incident can be a positive or a negative experience. The use of reflective processes is applied subconsciously, but the ability to structure this thought process allows a new insight for development (Elliott, 2004).

Many frameworks of reflective have been devised. Their purpose is to allow the individual to analyse their actions critically. These frameworks follow similar structures. John's model of structured reflection revolves around five key points: description of the experience, reflection, influencing factors, evaluation and learning. This framework helps guide the individual to reflect upon their actions and learn from their experiences. Reflective models are commonly used in medical education. Their use allows medical professionals to consider the care they provide and to enable professional development (Branch, 2005).

Veterinary nurses are now striving towards professional status and regulation of the profession requires the ability to reflect and be accountable for one's own actions. The introduction of the Veterinary Nurse register in 2007 marked an important development for the profession, as did the introduction of the Guide

to Professional Conduct in 2010 (Pullen, Wright, & Cooper, 2011). Veterinary nursing is evolving and the need to be aware of ethical, professional and legal issues is essential (Pullen, 2006).

Critical incident

A young female pregnant cat was admitted for a neuter surgery. The operation was discussed previously between the veterinary surgeon and the owner at a pre-operative consultation and it was decided to go ahead with the surgery as this was not her first litter. The owners did not want their cat to have any more kittens. It was uncertain how many weeks pregnant the cat was but obvious that she was in the later stages. The surgery was uncomplicated, but it was soon evident that the cat was imminently due to give birth. On removal of the uterus, it was obvious that the kittens were moving, breathing and in obvious distress. A snap decision was quickly made by the nurses to remove them from the uterus instead of euthanising them. The surgery had become a caesarean. On completion of the surgery and now with live kittens, the veterinary surgeon called the owner. After discussing what had happened with the owner they decided they did not want the kittens as their wishes had been to euthanise them. The owner was made aware that the cat was further along in her pregnancy than originally thought. The cat went home that evening and the kittens went to a rescue centre to be hand-reared and rehomed.

Professional practice

Veterinary surgeons are regulated by the Veterinary Surgeons Act, 1966. This act is governed by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons. Under this act, veterinary nurses must be accustomed with and work within the boundaries of Schedule 3 of the act (Pullen et al., 2011). In addition to the Veterinary Surgeons Act, 1966, veterinary surgeons must adhere to the Guide to Professional Conduct. The guide supports the veterinary surgeon by setting out professional responsibilities. The animal's health and welfare is the primary focus. Veterinary surgeons and nurses maintain five principles: professional competence, honesty and integrity, independence and impartiality, client confidentiality and trust and professional accountability. On admission and registration to the RCVS every veterinary surgeon and nurse makes a declaration in order to practice (Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, 2012).

"I PROMISE AND SOLEMNLY DECLARE that I will pursue the work of my profession with integrity and accept my responsibilities to the public, my clients, the profession and the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, and that, ABOVE ALL, my constant endeavor will be to ensure the health and welfare of animals committed to my care." (Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, 2012).

The introduction of the Veterinary Nurse Register in 2007 and the Guide to Professional Conduct in 2010 enables veterinary nurses to be accountable for their actions. Veterinary nursing as a profession is developing and the need for regulation is essential (Pullen et al., 2011). Veterinary nursing is striving to be a profession in its own right (Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, 2012). Veterinary nurses need to be aware of the legal, professional and ethical consequences of any decisions they make (Orpet & Welsh, 2011). Veterinary nurses are now able to face disciplinary action should the RCVS deem any professional misconduct. The RCVS is able to suspend or permanently remove a nurse from its register if necessary (Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, 2010).

The veterinary nurse Guide to Professional Conduct highlights that nurses are unable to practice independently of the veterinary surgeon (Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, 2010). The incident in question argues that the nurses made the decision without consultation with the veterinary surgeon,

and as they removed the kittens from the uterus itself potentially preformed an act of veterinary surgery; although the uterus was no longer part of the abdomen itself. The Veterinary Surgeons Act, 1966 states that euthanasia of an animal is not classed as an act of veterinary surgery. Therefore, the unqualified person can carry out euthanasia provided it is done humanly. However, with the exception of the RSPCA inspectors, pentobarbitone is only available in veterinary practice. The RCVS states that veterinary surgeons are not obliged to euthanise a healthy animal (Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, 2012).

The veterinary surgeon and nurses have a responsibility to protect animals under their care. The Guide to Professional Conduct has 10 guiding principles (Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, 2010). The first states that the animal's welfare is the primary consideration, but does this include animals that have not yet been born? The Guide to Professional Conduct also requires veterinary surgeons and nurses to respect the views of the client, who in this case wanted euthanasia of the unborn kittens. The owner's wishes were not taken into consideration and the responsibility to the client was not fulfilled.

Communication between the veterinary surgeon and nurses was also compromised as the issue was not addressed with the veterinary surgeon. The Guide to Professional Conduct states that a veterinary nurse must liaise with the veterinary surgeon regarding care of an animal. The veterinary surgeon was also put in an awkward position as the owners needed to be made aware of the situation. It is important to be as honest with the client as possible; however, the Guide to Professional Conduct states that when things go wrong, nurses should be prepared to explain and justify their actions to colleagues and clients themselves (Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, 2010). In this case professional misconduct was not deemed necessary. As the surgery had not quite gone as planned, the situation was reported to the practice principal in case of a complaint.

Legal implications

Veterinary nurses are accountable to the RCVS, their employer and to the law for their actions. Veterinary nurses need to be aware of the criminal and civil law relating to veterinary matters. Criminal law maintains law and order and defends

the public, whereas civil law relates to the individual and their rights (Pullen et al., 2011).

The Veterinary Surgeons Act, 1966 regulated by the RCVS governs the profession. The act states that only veterinary surgeons are able to diagnose, prescribe, advise on the basis of a diagnosis and perform surgery on animals. The act requires registration of practicing veterinary surgeons (Hockey, 2006). Members of the RCVS are required to continue their professional education and to maintain professional conduct (Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, 2012). The act states that no veterinary surgeon must practice unless registered. The act has had various amendments, the most recent being the 2002 amendment to Schedule 3 procedures relating to veterinary nursing (Hockey, 2006). The Animal Welfare Act, 2006 updated the 1911 Protection of Animals Act, which had become outdated. The 2006 version introduced a duty of care for pet owners, making them responsible for the welfare of their animals (Pullen et al., 2011).

The five freedoms are used as a basis to determine if an animal's needs and welfare are being met. These are: freedom from hunger or thirst by ready access to fresh water and a diet to maintain full health and vigor; freedom from discomfort by providing an appropriate environment including shelter and a comfortable resting area; freedom from pain, injury or disease by prevention or rapid diagnosis and treatment; freedom to express normal behaviour by providing sufficient space, proper facilities and company of the animal's own kind; and freedom from fear and distress by ensuring conditions and treatment which avoid mental suffering (Royal Society for the Protection of Cruelty to Animals, 2012).

1991 saw the development of Schedule 3 of the Veterinary Surgeons Act, 1966. This amendment of the act allowed veterinary nurses to administer medical treatment or conduct minor surgery (not entering into a body cavity) under the supervision of the veterinary surgeon. 2002 saw Schedule 3 amended further to allow RCVS-enrolled student veterinary nurses to carry out the same tasks under supervision (Pullen et al., 2011).

Consent is given by the owner and is a formal agreement for medical or surgical treatment. In this case, the client has granted informed consent as they had previously discussed their options with

the veterinary surgeon prior to surgery. In order to grant informed consent the owner must be fully aware of the facts and consequences and make an informed decision based upon the information given (Pullen et al., 2011).

A consent form is a legally binding document. Veterinary surgeons are bound by contract law as well as tort law (Dye, 2006). Both are classed as civil law. Civil law relates to the individual, in terms of personal loss or a failure to fulfil obligations. A contract between two parties is an agreement made for the services offered. Tort law is classed as a “wrong”, which in this case concerns the owner’s possessions (Gray & Wilson, 2006). As the surgery did not go as planned and the kittens were not euthanised, in terms of the contract agreed between the client and the veterinary surgeon a breach of contract has been made. A breach of contract is generated when one party does not fulfil the contractual duty (Martin & Law, 2009). However, even though the kittens were not euthanised, the cat was still neutered as consented. As the client is paying for a service that has not been completely fulfilled, they may require some form of compensation.

However, the Guide to Professional Conduct states that the veterinary surgeon or nurse is able to act without client consent in the interests of the animal when the client’s wishes conflict with the animal’s welfare. However, the act also states that the owner has a freedom of choice and this should be respected even when faced with difficult decisions. Veterinary professionals have a duty of care as well as a responsibility to both patients and clients. However, there is no legal duty of care to the animal, this is to the client (Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, 2012).

Ethical considerations

We are faced with ethical dilemmas and decisions on a daily basis. Many factors influence our choices, such as religious beliefs and education. What is a wrong or right decision and what are the consequences of our choices? There are various ethical schools of thought. Deontology is classed as non-consequentialist theory. Deontologists believe that the right thing should be done whatever the consequences. Utilitarians, on the other hand, believe in consequentialism, hence seeing the consequences of their actions and working towards the greater good (Pullen

et al., 2011). Having applied these theories to the case involved, it could be considered that if the nurses were deontologists, as it would appear they were, the kittens were not euthanised. However, if they had considered the consequences as a utilitarian would have, the kittens would certainly have been euthanised.

Neutering of pregnant animals always causes moral dilemmas. What one person believes is right, another may believe is wrong (Pullen et al., 2011). The pressure of charities to cope with the number of unwanted or abandoned animals has increased as well as overpopulation of the cat population. Finding homes for the kittens is a great strain on potentially limited resources (Royal Society for the Protection of Cruelty to Animals, 2012). There are simply too few homes, thus leading to an increased number of homeless cats. However, an argument could also be raised regarding the euthanasia of healthy animals. The Guide to Professional Conduct states that veterinary surgeons are not obligated to euthanise a healthy animal (Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, 2010). The owners in this case had been irresponsible by allowing their cat to have another litter, but were also being responsible by having her neutered even though she was already pregnant.

The subject of abortion must also be discussed. However, abortion is something that is more associated and debated with humans than animals. Animals have no say in this. The greater good must be considered. Morals and views relating to abortion are different when considering animals than humans. Allowing pregnant cats to have their kittens could be considered by many as adding to an already vast problem; to others, the thought of aborting the kittens is considered as murder, despite the bigger picture and considerations for their future. Neutering of animals before they are able to get pregnant is the only solution. Owners need to take more responsibility for this, but there should also be more awareness of the subject of neutering and responsible animal ownership.

Consideration for the kittens also needs to be taken into account. As the owners had decided not to take them, they would need to be hand-reared. This in itself is challenging and time-consuming with no guarantee that the kittens would survive. Therefore, knowing that the owners wanted no part, was it fair to allow

the kittens to live? The survival rate for hand-reared kittens is low and hand-rearing itself potentially stressful for them. By not euthanising them, have we made them suffer further? A human is a poor substitute for the kitten’s natural mother (Vetstream, 2012). However, have they a right to live?

Singer (2009) states that all animals are equal. Human beings have been considered to have a speciesism opinion towards animals, indicating a prejudice similar to racism or sexism. This term implies that humans have different values and rights based on their species. The argument is that if it is morally wrong to inflict suffering on humans, then it is also wrong to inflict suffering on animals just because they are a different species. Animals should be given the same respect as humans (Singer, 2009). However, are animals considered to have morals and rights? The argument for considers that animals have a similar biological structure to humans, they are able to process conscious thought, they experience emotion, pain and fear and, to an certain extent, they have some control over their own lives. It has been considered that adult humans and adult mammals both have rights as they both have life. The argument against states that animals do not think or have conscious thought, therefore they are not morally aware. It has been suggested that as animals are not part of a moral community, they do not live by a moral code and therefore have no rights (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2012). Humans, however, do have a moral obligation to animals (Singer, 2009).

Conclusion

With reference to John’s model of structured reflection, professional practice, legal implications and ethical considerations have been considered and discussed. The event in question has raised some questions and thoughts. Having considered the actions, it has been established that in the situation there was no right or wrong answer. The outcome was based upon values and morals, life or death. No further contact was made with the rescue in regards to the kittens, therefore it is not known if they survived or not. This in turn means we cannot reflect on the actions further as we do not know the full consequences of the decision. With regards to professional practice and legal implications, perhaps things could have been done differently. A discussion with the veterinary surgeon or indeed the client

would have been advisable; however, perhaps there was not time to discuss the situation with the client as the situation was urgent.

Veterinary nursing is evolving. To become a profession in its own right, nurses today need to be fully aware of the consequences of decisions they make. The veterinary profession deals with difficult decisions on a daily basis, but it is how we deal with these dilemmas that counts. The primary concern is animal welfare. The Guide to Professional Conduct (2010) is a structured document to guide us through our professional lives; however, not everything is black and white and the situation as a whole needs to be considered and addressed.

References

Animal Welfare Act. (2006). *The national archives*. Retrieved October 25, 2012, from <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/45/contents>

British Broadcasting Corporation. (2012). *Animal rights*. Author: Retrieved November 7, 2012, from http://www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/animals/rights/rights_1.shtml

Branch, W.T. (2005). Use of critical incident reports in medical education. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 20, 1063–1067. Retrieved October 23, 2012, from NCBI: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1490252/>

Dye, K. (2006). Consent to treatment in veterinary practice. In S. Pullen & C. Gray (Eds.), *Ethics, law and the veterinary nurse* (pp. 77–159). London: Elsevier.

Elliott, M. (2004). Reflective thinking: Turning a critical incident into a topic for research. *Nursing Times.net*. Retrieved September 6, 2012, from <http://www.nursingtimes.net/reflective-thinking-turning-a-critical-incident-into-a-topic-for-research/200145.article#>

Gray, C., & Wilson, K. (2006). Introduction to the legal system. In S. Pullen & C. Gray (Eds.), *Ethics, law and the veterinary nurse* (pp. 23–48). London: Elsevier.

Hockey, G. (2006). The Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966. In S. Pullen & C. Gray (Eds.), *Ethics, law and the veterinary nurse* (pp. 91–102). London: Elsevier.

Martin, E.A., & Law, J. (2009). *Dictionary of law* (7th ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Orpet, H., & Welsh, P. (2011). Present day veterinary nursing in the UK. In H. Orpet & P. Welsh (Eds.), *Handbook of veterinary nursing* (2nd ed., pp. 3–11). Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

Pullen, S. (2006). Veterinary nursing; the road to professionalism. In S. Pullen & C. Gray (Eds.), *Ethics, law and the veterinary nurse* (pp. 1–10). London: Elsevier.

Pullen, S., Wright, A. J., & Cooper, B. (2011). Professional responsibilities, regulation and the ethics of veterinary nursing. *BSAVA textbook of veterinary nursing* (5th ed., pp. 1–15). BSAVA: Gloucester.

Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons. (2010). *Guide to professional conduct for veterinary nurses 2010*. London: Author.

Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons. (2012). *Code of professional conduct for veterinary nurses*. Author: Retrieved September 29, 2012, from <http://www.rcvs.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/code-of-professional-conduct-for-veterinary-nurses/>

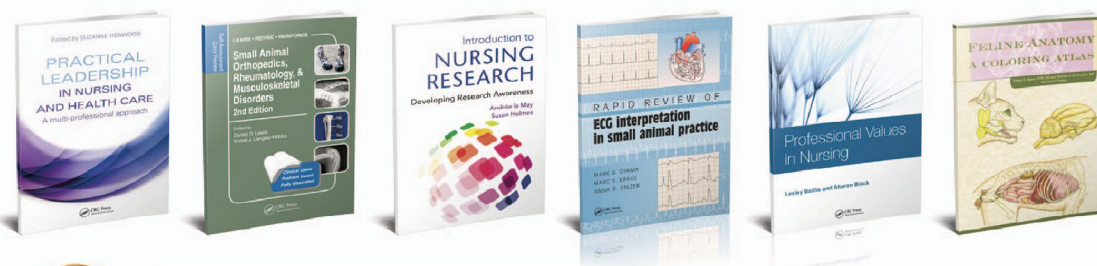
Royal Society for the Protection of Cruelty to Animals. (2012). *Animal welfare at crisis point*. Author: Retrieved October 7, 2012, from http://www.rspca.org.uk/media/news-story/article/Animal_welfare_at_crisis_point_Oct12

Singer, P. (2009). *Animal liberation. The definitive classic of the animal movement* (4th ed.). New York, NY: Harper Collins.

Veterinary Surgeons Act. (1966). *The national archives*. Retrieved October 25, 2012, from <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2002/1479/contents/made>

Vetstream. (2012). *Rearing orphan kittens*. Author: Retrieved November 7, 2012, from http://www.vetstream.com/ownerinformation/cat/felis_orphan.htm

EXCLUSIVE 20% DISCOUNT on all CRC Press titles for VNJ readers



Simply visit www.crcpress.com and enter code **ABP01** when ordering to claim your 20% DISCOUNT, plus free shipping!

www.crcpress.com

