

Article:

Veterinarian Accountability and the Exotic Pet Trade

Clifford Warwick, DipMedSci CBiol CSci FSB

Catrina Steedman, BSc(Hons) MSB

Emma Nicholas, MA VetMB MRCVS

Introduction

The issue of veterinarians actively supporting or pursuing interests and practices raises ethical questions that do not appear to be frequently examined in the published literature. These questions are especially important where practices raise concerns about animal welfare, public health or species and environmental implications, and veterinarians may develop associations with sectors such as the pharmaceutical industry, horse racing, and farming where animal welfare and other considerations may challenge some veterinary ideals.

Within these sectors, the issue of exotic pet trading and keeping provides a valuable case example for exploring questions of veterinary conflicts of interest and impartiality because the relevant issues are multifactorial, commonly co-existing, and well documented. Within the UK alone, numerous veterinary surgeons are employed by the exotic pet trade and occupy positions that involve commercial promotion of these animals as pets, as well as their commercial acquisition and sale. Also, some vets employed as 'experts' write media columns and, along with others, directly recommend the keeping of exotic pets.

'Exotic' pets (sometimes referred to as 'wild' pets) have been defined as animals that are, for example, 'non-domesticated' (BVZS, 2013), and 'non-native and not normally domesticated' in a particular region or country (ENDCAP, 2012). At least one thousand species across all classes are involved (CAWC, 2003), and both wild-caught and captive-bred animals are sold and kept.

Recent studies, scientific reports and articles concerning the exotic pet trade raise serious concerns about this commercial industry and the private keeping of wild animals.

Historical and current concerns include:

animal welfare – stress, morbidity and premature mortality accompany many animals at all points in the trade and keeping chain (for example, Akhtar, 2012; Altherr & Freyer, 2001; Arena & Warwick, 2004; Arena, Steedman & Warwick, 2012; Auliya, 2012; ENDCAP 2012; GAO 2009; Laidlaw, 2005; Koch *et al.*, 2013; McLennan 2012; Toland *et al.*, 2012; Warwick, Lindley & Steedman, 2011a,b).

public health and safety – zoonotic disease associated with exotic pets is now recognised as an emerging problem and a significant public health hazard (for example, Abbott & Janda, 2012; Aiken, Lane & Adak, 2010; Arena, Steedman & Warwick, 2012; Bertrand *et al.*, 2008; Brown, 2004; Brugere-Picoux & Chomel, 2009; Chomel *et al.*, 2007; GAO (2009); Hale *et al.*, 2012; HPA, 2009; Jones *et al.*, 2008; Karesh *et al.*, 2007; Mettee Zarecki *et al.*, 2013; Nenoff *et al.*, 2012; Praud & Moutou, 2010; Smith *et al.*, 2012; Smith & Whitfield, 2012; TRAFFIC, 2012; Warwick *et al.*, 2012; Warwick, Arena & Steedman, 2012), as are injuries from exotic pets a growing concern (Warwick & Steedman, 2012). Allied concerns have also been raised about antibiotic resistance associated with

both (unsuccessful) industrial and general endeavours to control or eradicate microbial agents (for example, Aklilu *et al.*, 2012; Rose *et al.*, 2013; Smith *et al.*, 2012).

species conservation and ecological alteration – threats to species conservation and ecological stability arise as a result of taking animals from natural populations, and from incidental releases of unwanted animals into novel habitats where they may become invasive alien species (for example, Andreone *et al.*, 2008; Bomford 2008; Bomford *et al.*, 2009; Faraone *et al.*, 2008; Ficetola *et al.*, 2007; Fischer & Garner, 2007; Fouquet & Measey, 2006; Henderson & Bomford, 2011; Kark *et al.*, 2009; Keller *et al.*, 2011; Kolbe, *et al.*, 2004; Krauss *et al.*, 2003; Langton, Atkins & Herbert, 2011; Lillo *et al.*, 2005; Rebelo *et al.*, 2010; Rhyne *et al.*, 2012; Scalera, 2007; Shine *et al.*, 2009; Shine *et al.*, 2010; Simon *et al.*, 2011; Skerratt *et al.*, 2007; Strayer *et al.*, 2006; Vilà, *et al.*, 2010).

These reports provide evidence that we suggest implies that veterinarians and other professionals should divest themselves of any direct promotional association towards the exotic pet industry or exotic pet keeping and maintain an entirely independent role. Further, as for other areas of questionable veterinary associations, we maintain that this position is both consistent with and obligatory to professional veterinary conduct.

Professional Declaration

Veterinarians undertake a declaration that 'swears' their allegiance to the interests of their profession as enshrined by charter and other mandate, and to be impartial. In the UK, the role of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, includes: "to safeguard the health and welfare of animals committed to veterinary care...thereby protecting the interests of those dependent on animals and assuring public health"; and "to act as an impartial source of information on animal health and welfare issues and their interaction with human health" (RCVS, 2012). Every veterinary surgeon makes a professional declaration, which includes: "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 endeavour will be to ensure the health and welfare of animals committed to my care" (RCVS, 2012).

Recently, the Federations of Veterinarians of Europe (FVE) published a European Veterinary Code of Conduct (FVE, 2012) which contains essential requirements for veterinary healthcare professionals including that "Veterinarians shall exercise personal and independent judgment after taking into account all relevant circumstances, without any application of personal interest or external influence. Customers have the right to receive impartial, independent and objective advice" and "Veterinarians shall restore and/or ensure the welfare and

health of the animals under their care in whichever section of the veterinary profession they work.

Veterinarians shall give emergency first aid and pain relief to any animal according to their skills and the specific situation."

Independence and impartiality are further stressed in another section of the FVE Code "All veterinarians owe a duty to their customers to carry out work and services faithfully, conscientiously, competently in a professional manner, and with independence, impartiality and integrity using due care, skill and diligence." And further "Veterinarians should make animal owners aware of their responsibilities to the public" and "Veterinarians should, whenever appropriate, advise their customers about measures to minimise the risk of zoonotic agents, food borne pathogens, residues, contaminants (biological and chemical agents) and anti-microbial resistance." Perhaps a key provision in the FVE Codes preamble is the following "Veterinarians provide high quality services for the benefit of animal health, animal welfare and public health."

Working within the Declaration

Among the responsibilities of the veterinarian are indeed certain arguably 'disquieting' duties, such as attending slaughterhouses, and these tasks appear clearly to conform to the role of the veterinarian assigned to assess animal health and welfare. The meat trade and the slaughterhouse are not for the benefit of animals. However, here, the veterinarian is an independent assessor, and not directly responsible for or promoting the business under scrutiny.

Essentially, the vet is a 'pawn' in another's game, and he or she is obliged to do their best to safeguard health and welfare and, in effect, not to be part of the problem.

However, the exotic pet industry and keeping hobby is a business where interests and practices regularly involve a clear association with animal suffering, human sickness and species and environmental degradation. All these problems are endemic to the exotic pet industry and keeping, and are unresolvable so long as these practices exist. No medical doctor would or should promote smoking recreational cigarettes or consuming foods known to be contaminated with Salmonella, yet both such practices are perfectly legal. No medical doctor would or should promote the trafficking of humans, legally or illegally.

Accordingly, while it remains fully consistent with the declaration that veterinarians treat animals that suffer as a result of any part of the exotic pet trade, and that they promote welfare by offering guidance on actual care, it is arguably not consistent with the declaration that vets play any role that aligns themselves with any 'promotion' of exotic pet keeping - whether by direct commercial participation, advice to 'obtain' an exotic pet, or guidance of any kind that may cause a person to participate in or support the exotic pet industry.

Impartiality

Impartiality is consistent with the professional declaration. Any vet who recommends or endorses buying or keeping an exotic pet arguably imparts guidance that is not fully consistent with ensuring good animal welfare or human health. Where a vet has a financial vested interest in any business that promotes pet vending and keeping there would also appear to be clear degradation of obligation to impartiality.

A vet can rightly refer to the sometimes human 'calming' benefits of having a pet in a vivarium, but this should be

equally tempered with the fact that a small cage is no place for a wild animal and that no amount of domestic cleansing will likely protect the household from zoonotic disease. Therefore, whilst it may be possible to offer limited argument that there exist certain benefits to some animals being kept as pets and people as keepers of them, it would be inarguably false to claim that exotic pet trading and keeping is for the benefit of animal health, animal welfare, public health, species protection or the environment.

It is, however, entirely consistent with both the declaration and impartiality that a vet may be fully opposed to certain features of a business or practice. In this example, the vet is not 'opposed' to pet keeping, rather he or she is opposed the harm that is done. All this is consistent with the precautionary principle - 'first do no harm', and certainly 'don't promote a known harmful practice'. Vets should occupy a detached position with no interest in the success or failure of the 'business' of exotic pet keeping.

Veterinarians in general practice hold overall responsibility for the animals in their care. Where a vet directly trades or promotes exotic pets then they must also assume accountability for animal welfare across all trade stages (including acquisition, transport, storage, general maintenance, and sale). Similarly, vets should also recognise their links with subsequent potential harmful consequences including animal suffering and premature mortality, public health, and species and environmental degradation.

Conclusions

Veterinarians are at the forefront of animal health and welfare because they are often the best qualified and the best placed professionals to whom most people have both trust and easy access. Vets also have an important role in highlighting zoonoses. The public need, and rely on, veterinary guidance for their animals and their own wellbeing.

Whilst the role of the vet as an impartial consultant appears to be formally and clearly established within ethical standards, the exotic pet trade serves to highlight several wide-ranging conflicts of interest that warrant renewed and careful scrutiny.

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