Letter to the Editor

Surgical debarking is permitted under certain circumstances by the Animal Care and Protection Act 2001, and Queensland Veterinarians have received a mail-out from the state's Veterinary Board detailing the circumstances under which surgical de-barking is permitted.

The issue of surgical de-barking presents veterinarians with a minefield of ethical dilemmas. I have experience with problem barkers, plus a major in Ethics, and I'd like to offer a discussion about de-barking in the hope that it may stimulate gainful debate and ultimately prevent some of my colleagues from stepping into that ethical minefield unprepared.

Under Regulated Surgical Procedures Debarking, the Act is two-fold. It says: 'Before de-barking a dog the Veterinarian must:

1. Be assured that it is in the interests of the animal's welfare; or
2. Be given a relevant nuisance abatement notice or an ‘appropriate' notice by the owner, and the Vet reasonably consider that the operation is the only way to comply with the notice without destroying the dog.

The first point, "in the interests of the animal's welfare", is the more easily interpreted. It covers any medical or surgical condition necessitating surgical de-barking, e.g neoplasia or trauma. The Act says about Regulated Surgical Procedures, "... The interests of the animal's welfare is considered to be about the prevention of pain and suffering (for example due to a tumour or following an accident). A threat by the owner to have an animal destroyed if the procedure is not undertaken is not considered to be a valid reason to carry out the procedure".

The first point does not cover situations in which there are non-medical reasons for de-barking. The second point refers to non-medical reasons for debarking. This covers the majority of cases and poses ethical difficulties. To satisfy the Act and de-bark, the Vet must both have a notice and consider there are no options remaining. Most vets know something about behavioural methods and the citronella bark control collars, but do not yet know of the electronic no-bark collars.

The electronic no-bark collars succeed even for the most resistant Barker where other methods have failed. It is so effective even for owners non-competent in behavioural methods one wonders why not just advise them to use an electronic no-bark collar first, doing them, their dog and their neighbours a favour. The electronic no-bark collar was found to be humane by The Federal Court of Australia in July 2002. It is triggered by a combination of vibration and sounds after 3 seconds of barking, so only the dog wearing the collar may trigger it, and only after being permitted to bark a few times. It delivers a warning tone first, if the dog chooses to keep on barking, a mild static discharge is given. It is completely triggered by the dog and is not prone to misuse. If distributed by Vets, then a suitable behavioural/medical plan may be devised to accompany the use of the electronic collar, e.g. regular obedience training, exercise, environmental enrichment, Clomicalm, and rechecks.
I would predict that if all Vets comply with the Animal Care and Protection Act and use the electronic no-bark collars for resistant barkers, then surgical de-barking would never be performed for non-medical reasons. This will be a victory for everyone concerned about unnecessary surgical mutilation of animals. Veterinarians performing surgical debarking prior to recommending an electronic no-bark collar may be in breach of the Animal Care and Protection Act and may be vulnerable to the applicable penalties.

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