

## Module 32

# The Role of the Veterinarian in Animal Welfare

This lecture was first developed for WSPA by Dr David Main (University of Bristol) in 2003. It was revised by WSPA scientific advisors in 2012 using updates provided by Dr Caroline Hewson.

# This module will enable you to

- Understand the role of individual vets
  - Pain management
  - Making ethical decisions in practice
  - Communicating with clients so as to maximise compliance
- Understand the role of the professional bodies

# Background

- Infectious disease prevention and eradication
  - ~60 vaccines (Mellor et al., 2009)
- Importance of behaviour
  - Clinical signs and pain
  - Behaviours as indicators of other emotional states
  - International Society for Applied Ethology (ISAE); co-founded by vet Andrew Fraser
  - Many vet schools have centres of research on animal welfare and behaviour

# Role of vets in animal welfare

- (Diagnosis, treatment and prevention of disease)
- (Assessing welfare in abattoirs and farms, and advising owners and officials about this)
- (Identifying deliberate animal cruelty (animal abuse))
- (Humane endpoints in lab animal research)
- Pain management
- Ethical decision-making
- Communicating with owners, officials, etc.
- Veterinary professional bodies

## PERCEPTION

To alter perception:

- Anaesthetics
- Opioids
- $\alpha$ -2 agonists
- Benzodiazepines
- Phenothiazines

## TRANSMISSION and MODULATION

To inhibit central sensitization:

- Opioids
- $\alpha$ -2 agonists
- NSAIDs
- NMDA antagonists (ketamine)
- Anticonvulsants

## IMPULSE CONDUCTION

To inhibit impulse conduction directly and central sensitization indirectly:

- Local anaesthetics

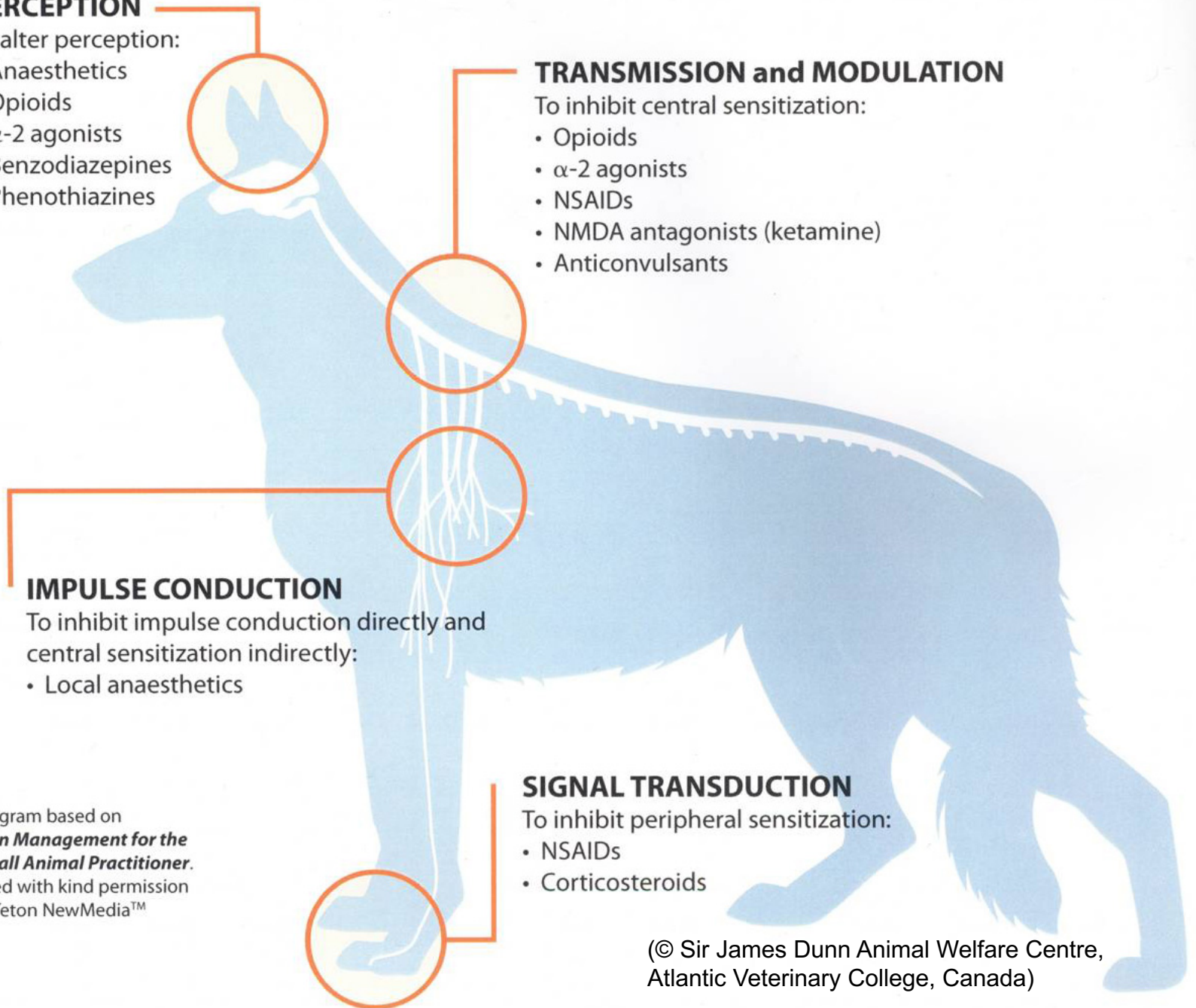
## SIGNAL TRANSDUCTION

To inhibit peripheral sensitization:

- NSAIDs
- Corticosteroids

Diagram based on  
*Pain Management for the  
Small Animal Practitioner.*  
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# Pain management

- Many vets may not provide adequate peri-operative analgesia to farm animals, horses, dogs and cats (e.g. Hewson et al., 2006a, 2006b, 2007a, 2007b; Coetzee et al., 2010)
- Reasons
  - Gender of vet?
  - Age of vet?
  - Real or perceived expense (e.g. lidocaine is very inexpensive in most countries; NSAIDs expensive and have withdrawal periods)
  - Limited availability of licensed drugs

# Attitudes among vet students

- UK (Paul and Podberscek, 2000)
  - Lower empathy among final-year male students than among first-year males
  - Males showed lower empathy than females
  - Importance of role models at vet school
- USA (Levine et al., 2005; Serpell, 2005)
  - Students from farming backgrounds showed lower levels of concern about questions of animal welfare than students from towns and cities

# Attitudes of vets

- Probably vary between countries (e.g. Sabuncuoglu & Coban, 2008)
- Logical ethical reasoning will
  - Reduce the effect of personal bias on animals' welfare
  - Enable the right decisions to be made rather than relying on common practice
  - Allow confidence in your professional decisions



# Ethical decision-making

- Ethical dimension to almost every action
  - Need robust, logical and consistent reasoning
- Two approaches
  - Six-point framework
  - Four guiding principles from medical ethics

# Six-point framework

1. Identify all possible courses of action
2. Establish the interests of affected parties
3. Identify the ethical issues involved
4. Establish the legal position of the dilemma
5. Choose a logical course of action
6. Minimise the impact of the decision

# 1. Identify all possible courses of action

- 'Value-free' stage
- Options can include
  - No treatment
  - Palliative treatment
  - Active treatment
  - Further diagnostics
  - Referral
  - Euthanasia

## 2. Establish the interests of affected parties (1)

- Parties may include
  - Animal
  - Owner(s)
  - Vet
  - Vet profession?
  - Society?



## 2. Establish the interests of affected parties (2)

- Conflicts between parties are often central to dilemma
  - Economics are often a significant factor
  - Other factors play a role
    - Money may not be the farmer's most important goal
    - Satisfaction of caring well for his / her animals can be more important
  - Each of those affected (or their agent) should explain why they hold their view
- Are their motives reasonable? Ethical tension

# Ethical tension

- What's special about the veterinary dilemma? (Morgan & McDonald, 2007)
  - Veterinarians have to serve patients and their owners
  - There is no universal consensus about
    - The moral status of animals
    - The value of each animal

# Dealing with ethical tension (1)

## (Morgan & MacDonald, 2007)

- Your responsibilities
  - Cannot follow client's wishes blindly – a danger with business focus in practice
  - Wider obligations: to safeguard welfare and maintain public trust

# Dealing with ethical tension (2)

## (Morgan & MacDonald, 2007)

- Client's responsibilities
- Continue exploring alternatives for the animal and the ethical issues involved with each one



### 3. Identify the ethical issues involved

- Must consider the ethical dilemma without becoming distracted from surrounding issues
- There may be more than one ethical issue involved



## 4. Establish the legal position of the dilemma

- Assume the vet will abide by the law
- Does the professional body have a policy?
- Consider relevant professional guidelines

# 5. Choose a logical course of action (1)

- Use a logical ethical theory, e.g.
  - Utilitarianism
  - Deontology
- Be aware of the theory's limitations
  - Is it still the most appropriate for this decision?
  - In practice, combination of theories used



## 5. Choose a logical course of action (2)

- Logical ethical reasoning will
  - Reduce the effect of biased attitudes to animal welfare
  - Enable the right decisions to be made rather than relying on common practice
  - Allow confidence in your professional decisions

## 6. Minimise the impact of the decision

- Often termed 'refinement'
- Aim to reduce the harm produced by the decision
- Easily overlooked:
  - Use principles of medical ethics to help

# Setting boundaries (Morgan & McDonald, 2007)

- Must respect the client's autonomy
  - The client has the right to make his / her own decisions
  - Do not omit or bias the information you provide, or use guilt to persuade
- Hospital policies, e.g. does not fire horses / dock tails / dispense drugs without seeing the animal first

# Six-point framework

1. Identify all possible courses of action
2. Establish the interests of affected parties
3. Identify ethical issues involved
4. Establish legal position of the dilemma
5. Choose a logical course of action
6. Minimise the impact of the decision

# Guiding principles from medical ethics

- When making an ethical decision, consider all these
  - Non-maleficence
  - Beneficence
  - Autonomy
  - Justice



# Non-maleficence

- Principle of doing no harm: *Primum non nocere*
- Ensure this first before going on to the next step
- May have to weigh up short-term harm against long-term benefit

# Beneficence

- The principle of promoting good
- Follows when non-maleficence is ensured
- Try to promote good in both the short- and long term



# Autonomy

- The ability of people or animals to be self-governing; to make choices about their lives *and to act upon their choices*
  - E.g. when to eat or sleep
- The choices of two autonomous agents may conflict
  - E.g. vet and client, predator and prey

# Justice

- Treating all animals and people in a fair and equal way
- Divide up resources
  - Equally for each individual
  - According to need
  - According to greatest benefit



# Practical examples

- Treatment of animals whose owners are on a low income
- Humane killing of stray animals
- Management of sick farm animals
- Management of sick draught animals

# Treatment of animals with low-income owners

- Does the practice have a policy on this?
- Does the professional body have a policy on this?
- What are the options?
- What action will promote the greatest good?

# Humane killing of stray animals

- Does the animal have
  - A right to life?
  - The right to a humane death?
- Animals may be
  - Healthy or unhealthy
  - A public nuisance / health hazard – must consider human interests too
- What course of action will promote the overall good?



# Management of sick farm animals

- Lack of treatment / delayed euthanasia
- Role of 'cheap food' policy (Hewson, 2007)
  - Society demands low food prices
  - Farmers' profit margins are very narrow  $\Rightarrow$  they may be slow to call the vet





# Management of sick draught animals

- Some may go untreated or have euthanasia delayed. Why? (de Aluja, 1998)
  - Economics
  - Attitudes: not seen as sentient
  - Ignorance
- Economic benefits of treatment / euthanasia?
- How can attitudes be changed?



# The role of vets in animal welfare

- Ethical decision-making
  - Six-point and four-point frameworks
  - Also need to understand causes of ethical tension and set boundaries
  - Examples from practice
  - (Yeates, *Animal Welfare in Veterinary Practice*, due to be published in December 2012)
  - Communicating with owners

# Communicating with clients

- The traditional way
  - The vet is expert, the owner is ignorant lay person
  - One-way communication
  - Relatively high non-compliance, i.e. waste of your time, waste of his / her time and money, and animals not helped
- More effective way
  - Understand owner's viewpoint, priorities, experience
  - Two-way discussion
  - Higher compliance: 'win-win'

# Communicating with clients

- Their internal motivation (Lam et al., 2011), e.g.
  - Economics
  - Culture and views of others, e.g. “This is how we do things”, “There’s nothing we can do”
  - Trust in vet / “experts”, etc.
  - Perception of the risk, e.g. “It won’t happen to me”
  - Peer pressure – what other owners do

# Communicating with clients

- Need to know what clients/others really want (Markeman et al., 2009; Kristensen & Jakobsen, 2011), e.g.
  - Men vs. women
  - Money may not be the farmer's most important goal
  - Satisfaction of caring well for his or her animals can be more important

# Summary so far

- Vets have made and make a huge contribution to animal welfare
  - Vaccines and treatments
  - Pain management
  - Centres of welfare research at vet schools
- Vets influence animal welfare individually
  - Ethical decisions about best treatment under the circumstances
    - Two approaches to ethical decision-making
    - Examples you may encounter
  - Communication with animal owners, handlers, etc.
    - More compliance if other person feels involved
    - Money is not necessarily an owner's primary motivation

# The role of vets collectively

- Licensing body
- Professional association



# Licensing body (1)

- Helps animal welfare / ethics by enforcing the local Veterinary Act
  - If members do not follow certain rules, they may lose the right to practice (be 'struck off')
  - Following the rules may not always result in the *right* action
  - May have guidelines for common professional ethical issues



## Licensing body (2)

- Influences legislation on animal welfare
- Develops policy
- May comment publicly on welfare



# Licensing body (3)

- Help animal welfare by ensuring that vets meet certain standards, e.g. have passed national exams
- Vets may have to take a solemn oath, e.g.
  - UK registration: “...my constant endeavour will be to ensure the welfare of animals committed to my care” (RCVS, 2010)
  - American Veterinary Medical Association oath: not a licensing body, so oath not binding
  - Taking an oath may not help animal welfare if the oath is not binding or if different parts of the oath contradict each other (Hewson, 2006)

# Licensing body (4)

- Helps animal welfare by approving the curriculum at vet schools
- Day 1 competency, new veterinary graduates (OIE, 2011)
  - Explain animal welfare
  - Identify and correct welfare problems
  - Know where to find information and local, national and international standards of humane production, transport and slaughter



# Licensing body (5)

- Could help animal welfare by acting as spokesperson to
  - Promote animal welfare
  - Communicate welfare / ethical policies to the general public
  - Comment on topical issues

# Professional association

- Protects vets' interests
  - Often these are the same as animals' interests (Main, 2006) but not always (e.g. Hewson, 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2006)



# Professional association

- May have explicit animal welfare positions (Hewson, 2004a)
  - Not legally binding



# Summary

- (Diagnosis, treatment and prevention of disease)
- (Assessing welfare in abattoirs and farms, and advising owners and officials about this)
- (Identifying deliberate animal cruelty (animal abuse))
- (Humane endpoints in lab animal research)
- Pain management
- Ethical decision-making
- Communicating with owners, officials, etc.
- Veterinary professional bodies

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