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EDITOR'S NOTE

What Constitutes Animal Cruelty?

“... no cruelty whatsoever passes by without impact.”

— Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

In my previous Editor's Letter (Nov/Dec 2019 issue), I focused on the most visible elements of animal-related cruelty or abuse. Since then, we have seen progress—the Preventing Animal Cruelty and Torture Act, which makes animal cruelty a federal offense that's punishable with fines and up to 7 years in prison, was signed into law by President Trump in November 2019.

But what about less visible acts of cruelty? Does ownership of an animal give a person the right to neglect any rights of the pet itself? What rights do pets have and what is our role as veterinarians in this arena?

In comparison to other countries, we are lagging behind. Chile, for instance, instituted a responsible pet ownership law last year. The law, which applies to cats and dogs only, establishes the duties of pet owners, who must declare ownership, get their pet a microchip implanted (the procedure is free), and take responsibility for their pet's nutritional and health management, including taking their pet for regular exercise! Those who don't comply face fines from US\$60-2200. In Switzerland, dog owners are required to take a series of classes on responsible ownership. People who own 1 indoor cat are required to let it outside, or give it a window from which it can see another cat, or else they have to get a second feline companion. Fish owners are even required to produce full day/night cycles for them with the tank lighting. Chile and Switzerland are not the only countries to have such legislation, which at minimum includes registration, vaccination, and microchipping. Why shouldn't this exist in some form in all countries? Why

shouldn't we advocate more intensely for the rights of our real “clients”?

The answer is complicated. In many places, cats and dogs are considered property. Technically, in the eyes of the law, they are no different from a couch or a car. Some will argue that affording our pets “rights” puts us on dangerous ground. The legal profession argues that only humans can have rights because rights imply responsibility and an understanding of how society and the law functions.

However, when you don't give animals some rights, you take away their protection, and they truly become property, subject to potential abuse. The question then becomes: what rights or protection should pets be afforded? Not taking veterinary advice, overfeeding, incorrect feeding, and lack of exercise could all constitute animal abuse.

It's a quandary—veterinary professionals benefit when pets are considered members of the family, but if pets are given that legal status, veterinarians are then open to veterinary malpractice litigation.

Putting aside the debate about the legal status of pets, isn't it time for the veterinary profession to acknowledge that animal cruelty encompasses much more than physical abuse alone? **TVP**

CORRECTIONS

We inadvertently made 2 editorial errors in the November/December 2019 issue of *Today's Veterinary Practice*. In the “Obesity Management Calculation Sheet” on page 29, the formula to calculate the rate of weight loss (step 5) should be:
Rate = 0.01(CBW) = ___ pounds lost per week

On page 85, in the article “Chronic Pancreatitis in Cats,” the sentence noting the dosaging for mirtazapine transdermal ointment should have stated: The only Food and Drug Administration (FDA)-approved drug that can be used as an appetite stimulant in cats is mirtazapine transdermal ointment (2 mg/cat, applied daily for 14 days).