

# Veterinary Medical Ethics

## Déontologie vétérinaire

### Ethical question of the month – January 2014

Acquiring funding for research at universities is becoming more difficult. To ensure objectivity and fairness, granting agencies require extensive pre-proposals followed by more demanding final proposals. Many strongly encourage multiple funding partners, which requires more grant writing. The percentage of competitive research grants sought that are successful can be as low as 10% to 20%. As a result, university professors spend much time in unsuccessful efforts to acquire research funding. A solution to this problem comes from the private sector which views university faculty as sources of credible and economical high quality research. If a hypothesis proposed by industry is of questionable scientific value, researchers reply that the work is valued by their “industry partners.” Faculty can now base their careers on non-competitive grants that fund research that tests hypotheses of someone else’s creation. As “negative” findings are seldom published, private industry risks little if their study does not produce the desired positive outcome. **Can this trend of faculty acting as contractually limited researchers for private industry create unforeseen problems?**

### Question de déontologie du mois – Janvier 2014

Il devient de plus en plus difficile d’acquérir des fonds pour la recherche dans les universités. Afin d’assurer l’objectivité et l’équité, les organismes subventionnaires exigent des demandes préliminaires suivies de propositions finales plus exigeantes. Beaucoup d’entre eux encouragent des partenaires subventionnaires multiples, ce qui exige plus de rédaction pour les subventions. Le pourcentage de réussite des subventions de recherche concurrentielles peut être aussi bas que de 10 % à 20 %. Par conséquent, les professeurs d’université consacrent beaucoup de temps à travailler à des projets d’acquisition de fonds de recherche qui se soldent par un échec. Une solution à ce problème provient du secteur privé qui envisage les professeurs d’université comme des sources de recherche crédible et économique de grande qualité. Si une hypothèse proposée par l’industrie est d’une valeur scientifique douteuse, les chercheurs répondent que les travaux sont valorisés par leurs «partenaires de l’industrie». Les professeurs peuvent maintenant baser leur carrière sur des subventions non concurrentielles qui financent de la recherche qui vérifie des hypothèses sur la création d’une autre personne. Vu que les résultats «négatifs» sont rarement publiés, il y a peu de risques pour l’industrie privée si leur étude ne produit pas le résultat positif souhaité. **Est-ce que cette tendance où les professeurs agissent comme des chercheurs à contrat limité pour l’industrie privée soulève des problèmes imprévus?**

Responses to the case presented are welcome. Please limit your reply to approximately 50 words and forward along with your name and address to: **Ethical Choices, c/o Dr. Tim Blackwell, Veterinary Science, Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, 6484 Wellington Road 7, Unit 10, Elora, Ontario N0B 1S0; telephone: (519) 846-3413; fax: (519) 846-8178; e-mail: tim.blackwell@ontario.ca**

Suggested ethical questions of the month are also welcome! All ethical questions or scenarios in the ethics column are based on actual events, which are changed, including names, locations, species, etc., to protect the confidentiality of the parties involved.

Les réponses au cas présenté sont les bienvenues. Veuillez limiter votre réponse à environ 50 mots et nous la faire parvenir par la poste avec vos nom et adresse à l’adresse suivante : **Choix déontologiques, a/s du Dr Tim Blackwell, Science vétérinaire, ministère de l’Agriculture, de l’Alimentation et des Affaires rurales de l’Ontario, 6484, chemin Wellington 7, unité 10, Elora, (Ontario) N0B 1S0; téléphone : (519) 846-3413; télécopieur : (519) 846-8178; courriel : tim.blackwell@ontario.ca** Les propositions de questions déontologiques sont toujours bienvenues! Toutes les questions et situations présentées dans cette chronique s’inspirent d’événements réels dont nous modifions certains éléments, comme les noms, les endroits ou les espèces, pour protéger l’anonymat des personnes en cause.

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## Ethical question of the month – October 2013

You are an experienced veterinary surgeon who has worked for decades with a number of show breeders who are among your best clients. These breeders strongly believe that the standard elective surgical procedures that are routine in many breeds protect their dogs from infections, hematomas, and allow the dogs to do their intended work more effectively. The Canadian Veterinary Medical Association's new position statement opposing "purely cosmetic" surgery has forced you to stop performing these procedures. Your clients now go to the United States to have this work done. One of these clients presents you with a 12-week-old puppy with badly infected ears following an ear cropping in the United States. She is distraught regarding the pain the dog is suffering and concerned because this is an outstanding individual from her best line of dogs. The ears are infected, sutures are tearing out, and the quality of the surgery is far below your standards. You are confident you can treat the infection, but some re-trimming is necessary to allow this dog to have any chance of a future on the show circuit. The breeder will euthanize the dog if it cannot be re-trimmed as she does not want the dog in its current state to represent her kennel even as someone's pet. **What should you do?**

## Question de déontologie du mois – Octobre 2013

Vous êtes un chirurgien vétérinaire chevronné qui a travaillé pendant des décennies avec plusieurs éleveurs de chiens de concours qui figurent parmi vos meilleurs clients. Ces éleveurs croient fermement que les interventions chirurgicales non urgentes habituelles qui sont routinières pour beaucoup de races protègent leurs chiens contre des infections, des hématomes et permettent aux chiens de réaliser leurs tâches caractéristiques plus efficacement. Le nouvel énoncé de position de l'Association canadienne des médecins vétérinaires qui s'oppose à la chirurgie « purement esthétique » vous a forcé à cesser ces interventions. Vos clients vont maintenant aux États-Unis pour faire effectuer ces chirurgies. L'un de ces clients vous présente un chiot âgé de 12 semaines qui a des oreilles gravement infectées après une taille des oreilles réalisée aux États-Unis. Elle est désolée de voir la douleur du chien et elle s'inquiète parce qu'il s'agit d'un chien exceptionnel provenant de sa meilleure lignée. Les oreilles sont infectées, les points de suture s'enlèvent et la qualité de la chirurgie est de beaucoup inférieure à vos normes. Vous êtes confiant que vous pouvez traiter l'infection, mais une nouvelle taille est nécessaire pour permettre à ce chien d'avoir une chance dans les concours. L'éleveur fera euthanasier le chien si les oreilles ne peuvent pas être taillées de nouveau, car elle ne veut pas que ce chien, dans son état actuel, représente son chenil, même en tant qu'animal de compagnie de quelqu'un d'autre.

**Que devriez-vous faire?**

### Cosmetic surgery dilemma – A comment

There are two elements to this scenario. The first — the need for the veterinarian to address the medical needs of the puppy — does not involve an ethical dilemma. This would likely involve wound debridement, appropriate antimicrobial, and analgesic therapy to treat the pinnae infection (i.e., this is not "cosmetic" surgery).

The second element in this scenario is how the veterinarian should approach the client's desire to have this puppy endure not just one cropping procedure, but also a second "retrimming" for show purposes. The CVMA encourages veterinarians to educate clients that there is no scientific evidence to support the practice of ear cropping as a procedure that provides any health or welfare benefit for the dog. In this case, the veterinarian should counsel the client that euthanizing the puppy if the ear trimming procedure cannot be done such that the dog meets the current show standard is not a reasonable course of action.

The CVMA encourages all Canadian dog clubs to show leadership and eliminate the desire for cropped ears (and docked tails) by revising canine breed standards so that they allow for natural ears (and tails) and by raising awareness amongst purebred club members, show judges, and the public about the unnecessary pain and suffering caused by these procedures. CVMA position statements are intended to be science-based guidance documents and do not "force" Canadian veterinarians to stop performing cosmetic or other procedures. The CVMA recognizes the positive step that several Canadian provincial regulatory authorities have taken to pass by-law amendments or codes of practice that prohibit veterinarians from performing cosmetic surgery.

*Patricia Turner, DVM, Chair, Animal Welfare Committee, Canadian Veterinary Medical Association*

## An ethicist's commentary on botched ear-cropping

Currently, ear-cropping is banned in Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, England, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Scotland, Slovakia, South Africa, Sweden, Switzerland, Virgin Islands, and Wales. It has recently been opposed by the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association. The procedure is, except in rare cases, strictly a cosmetic one based on long-established breed standards. Given that society has ever increasingly moved in the direction of eliminating unnecessary pain in animal management, ear-cropping was an extremely plausible procedure to fall victim to this concern. Other than changing the “look” of the dog, (e.g., making Doberman pinschers look more intimidating), cropping has numerous negative consequences, including significant post-procedural pain (and even procedural pain when performed without anesthesia or by breeders); the very real chance of a botched job (eminent veterinary surgeon Dr. Harry Gorman always refused to either perform or teach ear cropping, because it too often made a surgeon look bad, in addition to harming the animal); and overtly displaying more concern for fashion than for animal well-being.

In the situation confronting us in this case, the breeder has had the surgery performed in the United States in order to circumvent Canadian regulations. The dog is already experiencing what is known to be a very painful infection, resulting from poor surgical procedure. Furthermore, the breeder has declared that she will euthanize the puppy failing rectification of the botched surgery. (This response is all too common among breeders, clearly evidencing total disregard for the animal's intrinsic value.) Your choice is to either perform the retrimming and save the animal's life, or allow it to be euthanized. Clearly, the former option is the moral choice, trading some significant

short-lived pain for a potential good life. On the other hand, you emphatically do not wish to encourage the breeder to seek cropping in the future.

Were I the veterinarian, I would express reluctance at retrimming the ears, but would agree to do so and utilize the occasion as a teachable moment. I would point out that ear cropping and tail docking are nothing short of mutilations, doing no good for the animal, and being functionally and morally on a par with mutilations that most people deplore when they are performed on farm animals, for example, tail docking in dairy cattle, now known scientifically to be highly painful and totally ineffectual regarding diseases such as mastitis. I would forcefully argue that such mutilations are unworthy of those who supply companion animals to the public, and demean the role of breeders in society. I would ask the breeder to take a strongly proactive role in changing standards governing the breed.

Such a stance, while morally praiseworthy, is very unlikely to be effective. In my view, as attested to by the countries listed, only the law is powerful enough to create an effective ban on such procedures. I would, therefore, expend some energy on banning the selling and/or showing of cropped or docked animals. The key to success would be convincing the public of the need to eliminate significant unnecessary suffering. While this would not come overnight, it is clear from the multiple societal examples cited that it could be accomplished. Such an action would help catapult the veterinary profession into a strong animal welfare advocacy position recognized by the companion animal owning public and help mitigate the negative image of veterinarians as colluding with industry on matters of animal welfare.

*Bernard E. Rollin, PhD*