Commentary

What does it mean to be humane?

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Confusion and misunderstanding often occur when two people attempt to communicate using different languages. More commonly, confusion arises when two people attempt to communicate using the same language but attach different meanings to the same terms. A good example is the term humane, particularly as it relates to whether the care we provide as veterinarians is humane.

The term humane encompasses the best qualities of humankind, including kindness, tenderness, empathy, and compassion. Although all of these behaviors exist to some extent in various animals, animals cannot act in a humane fashion (that is, animal behavior is not judged as humane or inhumane), whereas humans can act in a humane fashion toward other humans and animals.

Behavior that is inhumane is lacking in compassion for the suffering of humans and animals; synonyms of inhumanity include unkindness and cruelty. Thus, a veterinarian or animal owner who deliberately chooses to disregard available means to reduce injury or illness in an animal under his or her care could be thought of as inhumane or, in some circumstances, cruel.

The definition of cruelty encompasses actions that are inhumane and without pity. The definition of pity encompasses having compassion for the suffering, distress, or troubles of another. Whether an act is cruel depends not only on the act itself, but also on the intent of the act. In my opinion, cruelty involves acts and motivations limited to people.

The term welfare signifies a state of being or doing well. The concept of animal welfare has traditionally been founded on the premise that humans have an obligation to act humanely toward animals. In my experience, animal welfare problems are more likely to encompass acts of omission rather than commission (ie, deliberate acts of cruelty).

The term compassion is derived from Latin and comes from the heart. Similarly, in the context of compassion, kindness encompasses the desire to take an interest in others and to demonstrate our interest by helpful acts and encour-

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aging words. Compassionate kindness, by definition, is not motivated by self-gain or profit.

Finally, humility plays a role in compassion by helping to control the predisposition to develop an attitude that our education and professional status make us superior to the clients we serve. Despite our advanced degrees, we are all members of a profession whose mission fosters the well-being of others. Our mission is to serve, not to be served.

I believe that veterinarians can determine whether they are being compassionate and humane in their work by asking themselves two questions. First, am I striving to provide the type of care that I would choose if I were the patient? That is, given my knowledge, skill, and experience and the availability of support staff and equipment, would I consent to the proposed diagnostic and therapeutic plan if I were in the patient's exact situation? What diagnostic or therapeutic goals are likely to be achieved? Will the overall benefits of this plan of action justify the associated risks and costs? Second, in providing care for my patients, have procedures been designed to avoid or minimize discomfort, distress, and pain? Unless the contrary has been established, diagnostic and therapeutic procedures that cause discomfort, distress, or pain in human beings should be assumed to cause the same in animals. Therefore, procedures that cause more than momentary discomfort, distress, or pain should be performed with the aid of appropriate sedation, analgesia, or anesthesia.

For veterinarians, the extent to which we are humane can only be measured by our actions. To this end, we should take the initiative to put ourselves in others' shoes, paws, hooves, or claws so we can help them as we would want to be helped.

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