This module should take about 2.5 hours to complete, including the case study.

Throughout this instructor guide, information that is intended for you, the instructor, appears in italics.

Information that is intended for you to say to the participants appears in regular font like this.

Today’s session is about ethics in veterinary practice.

We will discuss common ethical dilemmas and some principles we can use to help make decisions. We will also have some discussions and then a case study exercise at the end.
In this lesson, we will:

- Describe the role of ethics in veterinary practice;
- Recognize common ethical issues in veterinary practice; and
- Apply an approach to making ethical decisions in your work.

Learning Objectives

At the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

- Describe the role of ethics in veterinary practice.
- Recognize common ethical issues in veterinary practice.
- Apply an approach to making ethical decisions in your work.
- Understand that ethics often is not about a single “right” answer, but about balancing competing moral and ethical claims.
To begin, let’s look at an example of an ethical dilemma reported recently in the news.
The instructor will read aloud the news story on this slide or ask a participant to read it.
Group discussion. Read each question and ask participants to share their answers. (This discussion should last about 10 minutes.) The exact content of the discussion will depend on the answers that the participants give. It’s expected that different people will have different responses. However, below are some main ideas to consider.

Is this intervention ethical? Why or why not?
The poachers are people and the government must protect their rights and their lives. In this case, the poachers do not have the opportunity for a trial or due process and are killed on the spot. At the same time, the poachers are breaking the law, the government has an interest in protecting the rhinos, and they have exhausted other measures.

What are your assumptions?
Is the person’s life is more important than a rhino’s life? Or does the interest in following the law and protecting the rhinos outweigh the poachers’ right to livelihood and life?
Whose interests are at stake?
The rhino’s interest in staying alive. The government’s interests in enforcing the law, conservation efforts to protect the rhinos, and the livelihood of the people working in ecotourism. The poachers’ interests in earning money, as well as their interest in due process if they are accused of breaking the law.

At the end of 10 minutes, please say, “This news article raises many ethical questions. It highlights how we all approach ethical issues based on our background, our professional and personal responsibilities, and in some cases, our religious views. Today we will be examining a systematic approach to making ethical decisions.”
This example raises several questions about right and wrong, about how we value human and animal life, and about the implications of our actions. These are all matters of ethics.

But what is meant by ethics? Ethics can be defined several ways. We can think of ethics as being a guide for living in accordance with our values. Joan Halifax, an anthropologist, says that, “The goal of ethical deliberation is not absolute certainty but reliability in our behavior, choices, and character.” Halifax is saying that the process of thinking about ethics does not necessarily lead to one final or “right” answer. But considering ethics can help align our actions with our personal and professional values.

Rather than a “right” answer, ethical deliberation often involves weighing competing interests in a way that respects and aligns with our core values and supports the development of our moral character.

What are some competing claims?
- Truth vs. Loyalty
• Individual vs. Community
• Short-term vs. Long-term
• Justice vs. Mercy

(Rushworth Kidder writes about these competing claims in his book, How Good People Make Tough Choices)

In these situations, ethics helps us make decisions that follow our professional and personal values.
Professional ethics are codes that guide decisions and conduct. As veterinarians and veterinary officers, we are bound by a specific code of ethics. Veterinarians in most, if not all, countries have codes of ethics. You may know yours by heart. Typically, these codes highlight three specific groups to which veterinarians have ethical obligations:

- Their patients, or the animals.
- Their clients, or the humans who have the animals.
- And the health and safety of the public.
How might the welfare of the animal, the needs of the owner, and the health and safety of the public be in conflict? Think of some examples when you felt caught between these three competing claims on your loyalty as a veterinary officer.

Please lead a group discussion of the question: Have there been times when you felt the needs of these groups were in conflict? This discussion should last about 10 minutes. If the meaning of this question is not clear to participants, here are some alternative ways of asking the same question:

• How might the welfare of the animal, the needs of the owner, and the health and safety of the public be in conflict?
• Think of some examples when you felt caught between these three competing claims on your loyalty as a veterinary officer.

The goal for this discussion is the exchange of ideas. There is no “correct” or “best” example. The intent is to help the participants appreciate situations when their obligations to these three groups may come into conflict. The responses will vary depending on the experiences of participants present.
Recall that we previously discussed that in many cases, ethics is not about making one “right” decision, but instead about balancing ethical responsibilities to animals, clients and the public.
Now let’s look at an example from veterinary practice that raises ethical questions.
Blue District Scenario

Imagine that you are the district veterinarian for Blue District. A local farmer named Isaac has requested permission to move his herd of cattle out of Blue District in order to go to better grazing grounds in the neighboring Green District. Before Isaac’s request is approved, you need to certify that you have examined the animals and that the herd is healthy enough to travel.

You travel to Isaac’s farm on the western boundary of Blue District. When you arrive, Isaac says that he is very glad to see you today because he plans to move his herd next week, and he needs the certificate as soon as possible. He explains that his cousin is a private veterinarian, and she was able to take blood samples from 20 of Isaac’s cows. Isaac shows you the lab results that he says were taken by his cousin, and they indicate that none of the animals tested positive for brucellosis. You know his cousin from past work experiences, and you like her and respect her work. When you ask Isaac if his cousin came to draw blood samples from the cows or if he brought her the blood samples, he hesitates to answer. He finally says that he brought the blood samples to her, but only to save time because he needs to move his herd very soon.

Photo from Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cow_female_black_white.jpg

Please read the scenario aloud or ask a participant to read it aloud.
Ask the group the question, “What would you do?”

Lead a group discussion for approximately 10 minutes. The goal for this discussion is the exchange of ideas. There is no single “correct” or “best” answer. If the participants offer different perspectives, feel free to ask follow-up questions to determine why the participant chose a particular course of action.

Thank the participants for sharing their ideas. Now let’s look at some principles that can be used to help make a decision.

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Blue District Scenario

What would you do?

Let’s look at how ethical principles can guide decision-making.

Photo from Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cow_female_black_white.jpg
Beneficence, which asks the question, “Will this action provide benefits?”

Nonmaleficence, which asks the question, “Will this action cause harm?”

Autonomy and Respect, which ask, “Does this action respect the animals, your clients, and the general public?”

And Justice, which asks, “Is this action fair to the persons and the animals involved?”

Let’s look at each of these principles separately, and think about how they can be applied to the Blue District scenario we discussed.
These four principles are a helpful way to look at ethical challenges. However, they are not the only way to think about these challenges.

The Ethics of Care, described by Carol Gilligan, emphasizes the central importance of care. It is based on lived experience, not abstract principles. In other words, the ethical course of action depends on the specific context and the relationships involved. There is not one “right” course of action that is true for all people in all places and in all times.

Ubuntu is a concept – a whole philosophy – that is common in Southern Africa. It can be summarized by Desmond Tutu’s quote, “My humanity is caught up with and is inextricably bound to yours.” It emphasizes interconnectedness and the importance of caring for other people in community.
Beneficence means “doing good.” All ethical, religious, and spiritual traditions affirm the need to “do good” for others—to be kind, for example. As human beings, we would not be alive today if others had not looked out for our welfare.

The challenge arises when doing good for one person or animal might have negative consequences for other persons or animals. Can you think of an example where this might occur?

→ Here, an example could be that doing good for Isaac (allowing him to move his herd) might harm someone else if any of his cows test positive for brucellosis and other cows become infected.

In addition, we sometimes find ourselves in situations where we know the right thing to do to help someone, or to bring healing to a patient (animal), but because of our role, limited resources, or other circumstances, we are unable to do this. Can you think of such a situation?

→ Examples: If a medication is scarce or unavailable, you may not be
able to treat all (or any) animals despite knowing how to. Or if there is a client who
refuses to treat their animals when they become ill, but you don’t have the authority
to insist on treatment.

Let’s think about the scenario we discussed earlier where you are the veterinary
officer for Blue District, and Isaac the farmer wants you to certify that he can move
his herd. What does it mean to “do good” for the people and animals here?

What is a way you could do good for Isaac? (1-2 minutes per question, elicit responses
from class)

→ You could do good for Isaac by allowing him to move his herd, which
would help his livelihood.

What is a way you could do good for Isaac’s animals?

→ Moving the herd also would do good for Isaac’s animals because he’s
presumably moving them to a location with better grazing land.

What is a way you could do good for other community members or animals?

→ Testing Isaac’s herd again could potentially protect other people and
animals from brucellosis, in the event that any of Isaac’s cows have it.
Non-maleficence means “not causing harm.” This too, is a principle that all ethical, religious, and spiritual traditions affirm. It is also a principle that is deeply important to the veterinary and human medical fields, including public health. For example, the Hippocratic oath and veterinary Oath of Bourgelat are often interpreted as “do no harm.”

As with beneficence, as a general principle this is easy to affirm. But in the messy circumstances of life, we face the question of whether it is possible to live – or to practice as a veterinarian – without doing harm.

Can you think of a situation in which inflicting harm – perhaps temporary – is necessary to achieve a greater good? For example, doing an examination on an animal that is in pain may temporarily make the pain worse, but is necessary to make a diagnosis and treat the animal.

Harm can be intentional or unintentional. Much harm is caused inadvertently, unintentionally, despite our good intentions.
How can we do no harm—or as little harm as possible—in the Blue District scenario? *(1-2 minutes per question, elicit responses from class)*

If you make Isaac wait to move the herd until you retest the animals, will this cause harm to his herd? To his livelihood?

→ *it’s possible that a delay in moving the herd could cause harm to the herd or to Isaac’s livelihood. Most likely, this harm would be temporary.*

If you do not retest the animals, could you be harming other animals or people?

→ *If an animal in Isaac’s herd does have brucellosis, it could be very harmful both to other animals and to people – not to mention the other animals in Isaac’s herd.*
Respect is another core principle. In human medicine, this is often framed as autonomy – giving people the autonomy to make their own decisions about what is important to them. Both for human and veterinary medicine, respect for the wellbeing of others – especially our patients – is essential.

Veterinarians have responsibilities to act respectfully and ethically with regards to their patients (animals), their clients, and the health of the public. Can you imagine any situations in which it is difficult to act with respect for, or in the interests of, all three groups?

→ This situation is a good example, but participants can also offer others. Any public health emergency where people must be treated against their will (or animals against their owners’ will) would be another example. In this situation, the veterinarian must balance Isaac’s interests (moving his herd), his cows’ interests (better grazing land, being treated if they have brucellosis), and the public’s interests (avoiding exposure to a communicable disease).

How should we think about autonomy and respect in the Blue District scenario? You
want to respect Isaac’s wish to move his herd, but you also have a responsibility to protect public health. Which of these responsibilities is more important?

→ Elicit answers from class. One possible answer would be: Public health needs are sometimes more important than individual preferences, especially if the individual preferences pose a strong risk to public safety (as may be the case here.) However, this isn’t always true—for example, in human medicine, we don’t force people to get flu shots, even though this would reduce the number of flu cases. Generally, the greater the risk to the population, the greater the need to prioritize public health over individual preferences.
The final principle is justice or fairness. Sometimes what is fair for our patients may not seem fair to our clients or the general public. The news item at the beginning of this session is one example where fairness for the rhinos may be in conflict with justice or fairness for humans.

In situations where the client’s or patient’s wellbeing seems to be in opposition with the health of the public, what does justice or fairness demand?

Let’s travel back to the Blue District one more time. How can you act fairly in this situation and what are the options that are available?

→ You can allow Isaac to use his unverified test results and move his herd. Or, you can tell him that he must do the test again and wait to move his herd until the results are confirmed.

Is it fair to ask Isaac to wait to move his herd even though he has documentation showing that they have been tested?

→ Isaac says he has already tested his cows and they are negative. However, he is also worried about moving his herd soon, which may mean that he
did not follow the procedure exactly (e.g. bringing blood samples to the vet). It is also possible that he took other measures to make it more likely the tests were negative (e.g. drawing samples from cows that seemed healthiest). From Isaac’s standpoint, though, additional testing will likely feel unnecessary and like a waste of time, and he may be upset about the additional cost. He also may question your motives (e.g. safety vs. money).

Is it fair to the public for you to use these results even though you have not verified them?

→ One test of fairness is to ask, “what if all farmers were able to move their herds based on unverified lab results?” If we would not want this to be done regularly, that would suggest that we should think twice about doing it here. If one of the cows does turn out to have brucellosis, animals (and people) could be seriously harmed. If you did not follow the complete procedure for verifying test results, you would bear much of the responsibility for this harm.

What conflicts of interest might you have in this case (for example, might your previous relationship with Isaac make a difference in how you decided what action to take)?

→ You know and trust the veterinarian who tested Isaac’s cows, but this may mean that you are less willing to take all the steps necessary to ensure the cows are healthy. Additionally, if you are acting in a private capacity, you want to ensure that you keep Isaac’s business in the future, so you may be less likely to insist that he test his cows again, since this will cost him more, take more time, and may make him upset.
We’ve talked about the four principles, one possible approach to ethical questions. Here are some things to consider about the four principles. We will shortly do a case study where you will apply these principles.

Group discussion. If time, read each question and ask participants to share their answers.
When people feel threatened, either by an epidemic, or conflict, or financial ruin, or because they mistrust the intentions of people in authority (such as representatives of government), they tend to react in ways to maximize the safety and survival of themselves and their families. In moments of fear, it is more difficult to be concerned about the welfare of others.

Divided loyalties occur when we have obligations to more than one party, and that the interests of each one may be in conflict with each other. (If time allows: Can anyone share an example of divided loyalties from their work?)

Moral distress occurs when we know what the ethical or “right” course of action is but are unable to do it. Moral distress is especially common in health care workers, who are committed to relieving suffering of their patients, but find themselves in situations where, because of their role, the rules of an organization or system, or scarcity of resources, they are unable to relieve suffering, and may seem to be actually contributing to it. (If time allows: Can you think of an example in which you experienced moral distress? What did you do?)

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**Common Ethical Challenges in Veterinary Practice**

- Situations characterized by **fear, threat, and mistrust**, such as an infectious disease outbreak
- **Divided loyalties** between patients, clients, and public health and safety (conflict of interest)
- **Moral Distress**: when you realize you are causing harm or violating your core principles, but you can’t avoid it
If time allows: Group discussion. Ask participants to share other examples of ethical dilemmas that they experience in their veterinary practice.
Return for a moment to professional ethics. As veterinary officers, you operate under certain laws and government regulations, and you are expected to practice according to ethical values of your profession. These laws, regulations, and values offer guidance in navigating ethical dilemmas.

Ask the group for examples of veterinary law and/or national veterinary ethical regulations in your country. (For example: does your country have a law that restricts or prohibits the use of certain antibiotics in animals?) If there are laws or standards in place, how regularly are they enforced? Are there corruption or other factors to consider? Are there peer groups or ethics committees where challenges related to veterinary ethics can be discussed, and if so, are they helpful?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Law and Veterinary Ethics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Does your country have a veterinary association?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Does the veterinary law in your country have bylaws or regulations related to ethical behavior?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• If you do have these laws, how much are they enforced? What challenges are there with enforcement?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Are there mechanisms for reporting and discussing ethical issues?</td>
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Practical Ethics for Veterinarians: End of Module
Practical Ethics for Veterinarians: Case Study
Ethical Decision-Making in Global Health: A Proposed Approach

Let’s look at a framework you can use when faced with an ethical dilemma.
**Step 1: Understand and describe the situation.**
What is at stake? Who are the stakeholders? These would usually be the animals, the clients, and the public. What information do you still need that would help you clarify the issue?

**Step 2: Look inward.** Ask yourself: what are my go-to principles and core values? What is my own self-interest in this situation? Do I have potential conflicts of interest—for example, do I have loyalties or conflicts with a particular client or another stakeholder in this situation? Also, what feelings (like anxiety or fear) are triggered or activated by this question or issue?

**Step 3: Make a list of options.** What options or courses of action would you consider, while keeping in mind potential benefits and harms of each option? (This step corresponds to the principles of beneficence and non-maleficence.) Here are some things you can ask yourself with each option:
- Who would benefit?
- Are the benefits well established?
- Who might be harmed?
• What unintended harm might be possible?

**Step 4: For each proposed option, what steps can be taken to ensure respect and fairness?** (This step corresponds to autonomy/respect and justice.) Here are some things you can ask yourself:
- Has the intervention been explained?
- Have persons affected been involved in the decision making?
- What provisions are in place to minimize harm?

**Step 5: Review the options and decide on your course of action.** Consider: why did you choose the option you did? What concerns do you still have? Who might oppose this course of action and how might their objections be addressed? Continue to consider what systems are in place to detect and address unintended negative consequences of your action. Also ask yourself what support you need for this action to be successful.
Scenario about Conflicts of Interest:
Dilemmas for government veterinarians who also conduct private practice
A Scenario about Conflicts of Interest: Dilemmas for government veterinarians who also conduct private practice

You are sub-county Veterinary Officer in District A, in East Africa. You receive an urgent call from a rural pastoralist farmer seeking your help for one of his prize cows, which is high-value (Friesian pedigree). You quickly cancel your meetings for the day and drive to meet him. When you arrive, you find that the cow is recumbent, in advanced stages of pregnancy, with a ruptured amniotic sac, active uterine contractions, and severe vaginal prolapse with indications of dystocia. The animal has been showing signs of discomfort and restlessness for more than 6 hours. There are no other competent veterinary surgeons to handle the case in the area – the nearest being 75 km away.

The situation is an emergency. The government pays your (modest) salary and expects you to be responsible for animal health, but doesn’t provide supplies or materials to handle surgical and clinical cases except for special assignments on rare occasions. You happen to have the necessary supplies in your vehicle and are willing to use them in your capacity as a private veterinarian, but you must charge the farmer US $40 for your time and materials (in part because you need the money to keep your two oldest children enrolled in school), which the farmer considers a lot of money.

Being an experienced Veterinary Officer, you know that African trypanosomiasis, which is a priority reportable zoonotic disease in your country, is associated with uterine or vaginal prolapse. The health regulations of your country require you to report any clinically suspect case of trypanosomiasis to the District Veterinary Officer (DVO), and collect appropriate samples to send to the district veterinary laboratory or a certified private laboratory. The government laboratory services are free. The government lab test results tend to take longer, but they are reliably reported to the national health authorities. In contrast, the certified private laboratory charges for tests; results are obtained much more quickly, but reporting positive results to the government authorities, as required by law, is less reliable. In either case, the farmer must pay the cost of specimen collection.

Ask for volunteers to read this scenario aloud, then split the class into small groups (no more than 4-5 participants per group) to discuss the case and decide how they would proceed, using the 5-step framework described on slide 24. The students have a copy of this framework in the Participant Notebook that they can use for reference.

While the participants are working in small groups, please feel free to move between groups and listen to the discussions. You can also answer questions and help ensure the participants continue to discuss the questions in the exercise.

Participants will have 45 minutes to work through this case, using the 5-step ethical decision-making framework discussed in slide 24. Please keep the time and make an announcement to let participants know when they have 10 minutes left.

At the end of the time, bring the participants together again into the large group.
Slide 27 notes

*During the large group discussion, you can use the remaining slides to prompt a discussion about each of the steps in the framework.*

Please try to limit the discussion to 5 minutes per step.

For each step, call on one group to share their reflections and the course(s) of action they propose.

The objective of the discussion is to exchange of ideas and perspectives, not to arrive at one “correct” answer. Different groups and individuals will likely arrive at different decisions.

The “Case Scenarios” document includes questions and possible outcomes to help guide discussion, if necessary.

1. **Understand the situation:**
   
   What is at stake?
   
   • For the cow, i.e., the patient, her life and health are at stake.
   • For the farmer, i.e., the client, his livelihood, and therefore his family’s wellbeing,
are at stake.
• For the public, what is at stake is protection from the risk of further transmission of trypanosomiasis.

Who are the stakeholders?
Stakeholders include the cow (the patient), the pastoralist farmer (the client), and the public (other farmers in the area), as well as government authorities responsible for controlling disease. The veterinarian is also a stakeholder here, with interests and responsibilities.

What information do you still need?
The lack of reliable information is often at the heart of ethical dilemmas. What additional information could help clarify the issue? Many details that would influence ethical decision-making in this case are not specified. These include, for example:
• Are veterinary officers in this region legally allowed to act as private veterinarians?
• How sick is the cow, and therefore how likely is she (and her calf) to survive the surgery?
• How experienced is the veterinary officer in diagnosing disease and performing surgery?
• How much money does the farmer have—can he pay the $40 if he has to, or is he truly unable to pay?

2. Look inward:
There may a conflict between the Veterinary Officer’s role as a government employee and his or her role as a private practitioner. Essentially, if the veterinarian is working for the government, he or she is primarily responsible for protecting public health, whereas if the veterinarian is working in a private capacity, his or her responsibility is primarily to the client and the patient. Some government veterinary officers may supplement their income by also working as private veterinarians. However, in doing so, their role as government veterinarians (protecting public health) may come into conflict with their private role (to care for their patients). “Dual role” arrangements like this may be legal and tolerated by the government, but ethical tensions can arise as a result of dual loyalties.

It is important to consider internal conflicts of interest because our unconscious fears, attitudes, and emotions influence our ethical decision-making. Being aware of them will help us recognize when they are influencing our thinking. Might our decision differ, for example, if the farmer is a relative? Some students may answer yes, on the basis that loyalty to family obligations trumps one’s professional responsibility. Other students may disagree, appealing to the oath they took as Veterinary Officers. These questions are intended to provoke thought and to highlight that there may be divided
loyalties. Divided loyalties cannot always be avoided, but if we are not aware of them, they can influence our decisions unconsciously, in which case it becomes difficult to make ethical decisions based on conscious reasoning, consistent with our core values.

3. **Weigh potential options with respect to beneficence and maleficence:**
   There are two main actions to be taken in this scenario: 1) **addressing the immediate emergency with the cow** and 2) **addressing the health risk posed by suspected trypanosomiasis**. We suspect that the student groups will arrive at a decision to do surgery and to report the suspected case and send appropriate specimens to a laboratory. [However, see the attached “scenarios” document for a more detailed list of outcomes and considerations.] The **issues of benefit and harm for each of these actions should be explored:** Who benefits? Who might be harmed? Does benefit outweigh harm?

**Surgery to address the emergency:**

Who benefits?

Assuming that surgery is successful, the following would benefit: the patient, the client, the Veterinary Officer (through payment and reputation), the pregnant cow’s calf, and the client’s family (avoids loss of wealth). The benefit to public health is not as clear and direct, although one could make this argument.

Who is harmed?

If the surgery is not successful or supplies are not available, the patient would suffer the greatest harm, although since this is an emergency, the risk of action causing additional harm is negligible. Given the emergency nature of the situation, the benefits of action outweigh harm (assuming the surgeon is competent). This calculus would be different if the cow is already so sick that surgery would not be expected to save her life.

**Reporting the case to public officials:**

Who benefits?

Reporting the case potentially benefits to public health, other farmers in the area (if quick action is needed to prevent transmission to their herds), the Veterinary Officer (being conscientious about his or her public responsibility), and, potentially, the farmer (if his cow has condition that might also affect other cows in the herd).

Who may be harmed?

The farmer and his family could be harmed if the results trigger public health measures that reduce the size of his herd or that incur other expenses.

Less clear, and perhaps less of an ethical issue, is whether to use a government or
private lab. If the Veterinary Officer strongly suspects trypanosomiasis and knows that reporting from the private lab is spotty, then fidelity to his or her obligations to protect public health would favor using the public lab – and it will cost the farmer less. On the other hand, a rapid result may be more important for public health. But recommending that the farmer pay more for a private lab to avoid detection would be in conflict with the veterinary officer’s ethical obligation to protect public health. We need more information on the quality of the respective labs.

This case highlights two additional points. First, our intentions have ethical implications; the motivation for our decisions are, at times, as important as the decisions themselves. Second, many ethical dilemmas are related to institutional policies rather than individual decisions. For example, vaccination of animals may be required by regulation, but not funded by the government.

4. **Weigh how options can ensure respect/fairness:**

There is a potential conflict between the veterinarian’s role as a government employee and a private practitioner. As a government employee, the veterinary officer is supposed to report all notifiable diseases to the District Veterinary Officer and the Ministry of Agriculture and Animal Industries whenever diseases of public health importance occur. This obligation is consistent with the principle of fairness to all farmers – and to the public. However, as a private practitioner, the veterinarian may feel pressure not to report the case, since doing so might create financial hardship for the specific farmer.

Dual roles sometimes lead to conflicting loyalties. This is a client who the veterinarian knows well, and to whom he is loyal. In cases like this, it’s helpful to consider what would happen if everyone did likewise: what if all veterinarians did not report cases because they did not want to lose business or did not want to inconvenience their friends? Actions that seem justifiable in individual cases can cause big problems if they become widely practiced.

5. **Review the options and decide:**

As a competent veterinarian with an obligation to the wellbeing of animals, beneficence demands that a Caesarian section be performed, the fetus delivered, and the vaginal prolapse surgically corrected. Post-operative care and treatment against secondary bacterial infections would also be expected. However, if the cow is very unlikely to survive, it may not be appropriate to do surgery to correct the vaginal prolapse, especially if the client cannot afford this additional cost.

As a government Veterinary Officer, the veterinarian has an obligation to protect the public and to report the suspected case and obtain the proper samples. However, the
laboratory that you choose to do this (public vs. private) will depend on the urgency of a diagnosis (e.g. if you suspect many others are at risk you may be more likely to choose the private lab) and the ability of the client to pay (e.g. if client is very poor, may choose public lab to minimize the costs).

Depending on the course of action proposed, the instructor might question “what if” other things happen, or ask the students to consider what other factors might affect their decision and if so, on what ethical basis (what principle is invoked?). For example:

• If the veterinarian encounters unintended surgical problems or post-surgical complications and the cow died, would this be an ethical problem for the Veterinary Officer? No, not if he or she were a competent surgeon (not operating above his or her level of training), and took all standard precautions. But this experience should inform the Veterinary Officer’s clinical decision-making in the future.

• If the test results are positive, what financial implications might this have for the farmer and his family, and for neighboring farms? Public health would be served, but how could the Veterinary Officer (or the animal health system) minimize the financial impact on the farmer? Does the government have any compensation programs for these situations?

Note: the intent here is not to “prove” that one response is right or wrong but to emphasize that even ethical decisions, using all the best available data – which are incomplete – may cause result in harm to some persons.

Ethics is not about right vs. wrong, decided once and for all – it’s about continuously refining our decisions and improving our systems to maximize benefits, minimize harm, equitably distribute harms and benefits, and promote justice through this equitable distribution of harms and benefits.
Please call on one participant to read each one of the takeaways.
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