

Bridging Compassion and Commerce: Veterinarians' Ethical Dilemmas in Providing Care for Homeless Animals

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Abstract. This research seeks to expand the in-depth knowledge on the ethical dilemmas veterinary doctors face while providing care for homeless animals, brought to clinics by volunteers. Fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with veterinary doctors in Latvia. The study reveals the complex emotions involved in the interactions between veterinarians and volunteers, as well as the factors affecting a veterinarian's decision made about homeless animals. The results show a positive attitude towards the altruism of volunteers, but significant concerns around financial matters and the use of animals for fundraising. Debates about charging for stray care highlight potential disagreements between veterinarians and activists. Veterinarians prioritise education and advocacy, providing compassionate assistance to pet owners. Societal expectations strongly shape how they perceive their role, emphasising the reduction of animal suffering and the improvement of animal welfare.

Key words: veterinarians, stray animals, ethical dilemmas, homeless animal volunteers, animal welfare.

Introduction

The study of animal rights activism and its associated movements has gained significant attention in research over the past few decades (Lucardie, 2020; Schwarz, 2021; Backlund & Jungar, 2022). Scholars focus on examining not only the underlying motivations that drive individuals to engage in animal rights-related activities or volunteer work, but also the interconnected advocacy domains associated with such endeavours. A recent Šeiko & Nikiņins (TBP) study pertained to the perspectives of volunteers who help homeless animals. It focused on volunteers' beliefs regarding veterinary practitioners' stance towards animal rights activism and helping homeless animals. Some participants expressed the view that veterinarians are likely to have limited interest in advocating for animal rights in general, prioritising financial gain over animal welfare, especially having a lack of interest in assisting stray animals. The research findings point towards a discrepancy between the perspectives of volunteers and the prevailing perception of veterinarians as compassionate people who are ready to provide care for any animal (Merle & Küper, 2021; Varela & Correia, 2023). While the basic tenet of the contemporary veterinary profession revolves around serving as an "advocate", engaging

with animal rights matters regularly through their communication with companion animal owners (Graaf, 2005; McGlacken, Anderson & Hobson-West, 2023), the sociological understanding of the involvement of veterinarians in the realm of homeless animal rights remains limited. It can be assumed that the reason for these limitations lies in the lack of scholarly attention within the social sciences to the involvement of veterinarians in animal rights activism during the 2000s. This can be attributed to the historical concentration of the veterinary profession on animal health, as noted by Jones (2003). In recent years, there has been an increase in attention towards veterinarians, prompting public discourse on the legal and ethical treatment of animals and their welfare within society (Grimm, 2014). This is due to the societal expectation that veterinarians should serve just as advocates for animals (De Paula Vieira & Anthony, 2020) in safeguarding the well-being of their patients (Rathwell-Deault *et al.*, 2017). The studies can be categorised into two distinct areas of focus: addressing ethical quandaries within veterinary practices and redefining the professional responsibilities of veterinary practitioners.

Existing research primarily centres on the ethical predicaments encountered by veterinary doctors in

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their daily practice, particularly when confronted with conflicting values and difficult decision-making processes (Tannenbaum, 1995; Morgan & McDonald, 2007; DeSantis Kerr *et al.*, 2016; Moses, 2018; Perssons *et al.*, 2023). This body of literature predominantly focuses on the ethical considerations surrounding convenient euthanasia of animals that are physically and psychologically healthy (Morgan, 2009; Rollin, 2011; Moses, Malowney & Boyd, 2018; Arbe Montoya *et al.*, 2019; Dürnberger, 2020; Glaesmer *et al.*, 2021). The study conducted by Rathwell-Deault *et al.* (2017) examined the ethical dilemma of veterinarians in Quebec when required to euthanise a physically and psychologically healthy animal). The findings indicated that a majority of veterinarians would opt to carry out euthanasia of healthy animals due to the perceived lack of the animal's moral value, which is influenced by the bond between the owner and the animal. According to Jacobsson & Lindblom (2016), the legislation governs the overall parameters of euthanasia, including the necessary conditions and medical protocols. However, it is important to note that the ultimate determination of whether to proceed with euthanasia or not remains contingent upon individual perspectives rather than being solely dictated by local legislation. The study conducted by Kipperman, Morris, & Rollin (2018) has provided insights into the perspectives held by veterinarians concerning the practice of euthanising animals. A significant proportion of the participants, specifically 45 per cent, expressed their agreement with the notion that they occasionally employ euthanasia in challenging situations, even when it may not align with the optimal welfare of the patient. Within veterinary literature, two distinct models outline the actions a doctor may take when faced with an ethical dilemma. The first model, known as the anthropocentric action model, does not consider the interests and needs of animals due to their status as property (Rathwell-Deault *et al.*, 2017). In contrast, the second model, referred to as the biocentric model, acknowledges animals as moral beings, equivalent to humans (Rollin, 2006). These models provide a connection between veterinarians and proponents of animal rights, like Singer (1975), Regan (1983), and Francione (2000), while also establishing a connection between veterinary medicine and social studies.

According to Siegford, Cottee, & Widowski (2010), since 2005 there has been evidence of a shift in the professional responsibilities of veterinarians. For example, in a study on redefining professional responsibilities, Dolby & Litster (2015) focused on the educational function of veterinarians in the domains of animal welfare and the human-animal link. They put forward the argument that veterinarians should

not be perceived only as medical personnel, but also as volunteers. The survey revealed limited agreement among participants on the subject matter of animal welfare and the relationship between humans and animals. The emphasis placed by veterinarians on the human perspective rather than the animal perspective within the realm of the animal rights activism was underscored. Additionally, Dolby & Litster (2015) have highlighted that veterinarians still do not perceive themselves as educators of pet owners. The current study has also failed to consider the matter of animal value as seen by owners, resulting in the researchers drawing the inference that stray dogs had diminished worth due to the absence of an emotional link to people. Nevertheless, while this assertion aligns with the attitude of volunteers who assist with care of homeless animals (Šeiko & Ņikiņšins, TBP), it would be hasty to generalise that all veterinarians adhere to this standpoint. An answer provided by Rollin (2005) in the Canadian Veterinary Journal addressed the ethical inquiry regarding the professional and ethical responsibilities of veterinarians. The question posed was whether veterinarians should allow the population of cats to be subject to "natural selection" or bear the economic burden of treating stray cats. Rollin emphasised that the veterinarian's foremost obligation to alleviate suffering by euthanising animals that have little chance of recovery and to prioritise the sterilisation of a significant number of animals. The application of the World Small Animal Veterinary Association's guideline to safeguard animals from pain, injury, anxiety, and discomfort is evident in this particular instance (Terrestrial Animal Health Code, 2016; Ryan *et al.*, 2019). Rollin (2011) suggests that veterinarians might employ innovative strategies to encourage public donations for the care of injured and unidentified animals brought to clinics by volunteers who lack the financial means to cover the expenses.

The literature analysis poses a question that this study must answer: does a moral dilemma arise when volunteers bring homeless animals (usually cats) to clinics for treatment? In the case of stray cats, it is not feasible to attribute the concept of property status to an animal. Some volunteers in Šeiko & Ņikiņšins (TBP) study proposed that veterinarians adopt the role of medical specialists and are not interested in animal rights advocacy. This unflattering attitude can be caused by high costs of veterinary services and volunteers' endeavours to fight not only for animal rights, but also for donations to cover treatment costs (Kipperman, Rollin, & Martin, 2021). Additionally, it suggests a potential conflict between volunteers assisting homeless animals and veterinary professionals. Therefore, this study aims to enhance the overall understanding of the ethical dilemmas veterinary

doctors face while providing care for homeless animals based on their beliefs about their role in improving the wellbeing of homeless animals. The emphasis on this area is justified since veterinarians in small animal clinics often encounter the responsibility of treating homeless animals that are brought in by volunteers and by focusing on this particular group, the study can offer a more comprehensive and pertinent understanding of the specific challenges and moral issues in an evolving legal and social context. The research has been conducted in Latvia, a small European country with a high number of veterinarians per capita – 1.3 veterinarians per 1000 inhabitants (Federation of Veterinarians of Europe, 2019). It is important to note that Latvia has a developing legal framework, limited rights for veterinarians, and ongoing social debates regarding the extent of animal rights. Three research questions are raised in this paper:

1. How do veterinarians perceive and evaluate the role of volunteer organisations? Specifically, are there any similarities and/or differences in vets' understanding of the concepts of "rescuing" or "helping" animals compared to volunteers?
2. What are the veterinarians' beliefs about their involvement in addressing violence against homeless animals, and how closely do their beliefs align with their actions?
3. What are the key factors that impact veterinarians' decision-making and behaviour when confronted with ethical challenges relating to homeless animals in their practice?

This study centres on the animal rights beliefs-based ethical decisions made by veterinary doctors in situations of ethical challenges or during contact with homeless animals, brought to clinics by homeless animal help volunteers. The analysis sheds light on complicated emotions-influenced relationships between vets and volunteers, as well as on factors that impact a veterinarian's decision-making process regarding homeless animals.

Materials and Methods

This study employed a qualitative approach, as the authors anticipated that respondents would share their narratives on certain subjects and could freely express themselves (Mason, 1998; Morris, 2015). The use of semi-structured in-depth interviews appeared to be the most suitable approach as this methodology utilises the narratives of veterinarians. By employing this method, we gained insight into the interviewees' real experiences and understood their perspectives in their daily lives.

The initially recruited participants were veterinarians residing in Riga. Three participants were

identified through their engagement in veterinary forums on Facebook or by their response to an email addressed to veterinary clinics in Riga, where they were invited to participate in the research. The fourth participant showed a notable level of enthusiasm towards the research issue, leading her to willingly accept the offer to engage in an online discussion hosted by the Latvian Veterinary Association. This veterinarian doctor assumed the role of a gatekeeper and afterward, following the distribution of the call for volunteers, eight veterinarian doctors expressed their interest in participating in the study. Furthermore, the authors were invited to present their research findings at the annual meeting of Latvian veterinary professionals scheduled for April 2023. Following the conference, a greater number of veterinarians indicated their desire to articulate their perspectives on issues of ethics encountered in their professional practice.

The respondents were drawn from a diverse range of veterinary clinics, each with varying levels of experience: 5 respondents with up to 5 years of experience, 8 respondents with 5 to 10 years of practice, and 2 respondents with more than 20 years of experience. A total of 15 semi-structured interviews were performed with veterinary doctors in Latvia between January and November of 2023.

The ethical considerations for this study were established by the guidelines outlined by Creswell & Creswell (2018), no additional ethical approval by the author's institution was required. The consent document was verbally presented to all participants and given that the interviews were performed remotely over Zoom or MS Teams, the participants verbally gave their consent. The average duration of the interviews was around 1 hour. Interviews were conducted in the native languages of the informants, namely Latvian or Russian. All interviews were captured using audio equipment and afterward transcribed in their entirety. The anonymity of the participants was safeguarded through the utilisation of pseudonymisation techniques, which involved replacing the actual identities of the respondents with fictitious ones during both the recording and transcribing phases.

To address the ethical issues inherent in daily activities and the potential for intensely personal interviews, the authors adhered to the concepts of "empathetic interviewing" (Fontana & Frey, 2008) and retained "ethical mindfulness" (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004) in their conduct. To establish trust and minimise emotional discomfort, the initial inquiries were centred on the individuals' good experiences in their journey toward becoming veterinarians. The more delicate and potentially damaging questions

were reserved for the middle phase of the interview, as suggested by King & Horrocks (2012) and Morris (2015).

Results and Discussion

The interview transcriptions and data coding methods were conducted following Saldana's (2021) methodology using NVivo14 software. With a focus on the study subject, we generated codes using affective and exploratory coding methods (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). During the process of First cycle coding 89 open codes emerged, which during the Second cycle were organized into 19 patterns or distinct categories: Attitudes, Homeless animal, Volunteers, Other animal, Euthanasia, Emotions, Routine, Education, Laws and penalties, Role, Companion Animal, Narrative, Finances, Profession, Food and Veterinary Service, Pain and Death, Beliefs, Violence, and Owner.

The category Volunteers contains four codes: *Relationship with volunteers*, *Common with volunteers*, *Contradictions with volunteers*, and *Perceptions of volunteering as a business*. Exploring the perception and evaluation of veterinarians on the role of volunteers, by focusing on the hierarchy charts of intersecting codes and analysing the Items coded for the code *Relationship with volunteers*, it becomes apparent that it is also associated with *Emotion* codes, code *Beliefs toward violence*, and code *Financial matters*. The participants mostly speak about their positive attitude regarding the volunteers' motivation and share stories about volunteers who have brought stray animals to their clinics. "I believe volunteers' motivation is very noble. Good. Who will take care of animals anyway?" Veterinarians acknowledge that financial considerations significantly impact both the field of veterinary medicine as a whole and the capacity to offer aid to homeless animals specifically. Simultaneously, they dismiss criticism from volunteers of their refusal to provide medical care to stray animals without compensation. This subject will emerge as a major topic in discussions on discrepancies with activists, and aligns with Kipperman, Rollin, & Martin (2021) findings about perception of veterinarians as professionals placing more importance on financial profit rather than animal welfare.

Contradictions with volunteers persist with a predominant focus on codes such as *Negative emotions*, *Perspectives on violence*, *Pain*, *Financial matters*, and *Rights of homeless animals*. The subject of the *Euthanasia* code also arises. This concept can also be represented through detailed and engaging stories, explaining the vets' belief that it is rude to claim that veterinarians pursue their job solely for financial gain even from a strictly economic

perspective: an individual dedicates 6 years to studying and continues to invest significant effort in their profession throughout their life after graduation. Also because of emotional stress the suicide rates are high: "Activists see animals that are stray hurting or that they are doing well in their new homes. But they do not see veterinary medicine as a whole. <...> To see an animal suffering from the same illnesses and to fight for that animal, along with the animal and its owners, is an incredibly stressful job. <...> I can say that it is hard on an emotional level. We see deaths every day, and each case is different. And we all must deal with pain, suffering, blood, and other fluids every day." The increased level of stress and emotional burden experienced by veterinarians is consistent with the conclusions drawn by Rathwell-Deault *et al.* (2017), who observed that veterinarians encounter substantial ethical issues, particularly in relation to euthanasia.

This concept is expanded upon under the perspective of viewing volunteering as a sort of business. Within the context of this perception, such codes as *Negative emotions*, *Pain*, *Violence*, *Financial matters*, *Laws*, and *Euthanasia* are prevalent. "The statutes of these volunteer groups are great, and they ask for donations. But, as you may have noticed, they're all pretty weird in the end. It turns out that they show strange images of animals that don't exist or are made up. I think that as long as someone can use an animal to make money, there is a very, very high chance that they will do this." Veterinarians argue that volunteers use aged or chronically ill animals to get donations from sympathetic individuals. According to the participants, it is not worthwhile to make extensive efforts to prolong the life of a disabled animal, especially if it is unlikely to be adopted. Instead, it would be better to allocate the received donations towards sterilising and treating young animals that can be easily socialised. "I don't like putting terrible pictures all over the internet to get money from people. At the same time, if they are young kittens - they need to be vaccinated, they need to be castrated, they need to be put together everywhere - and people will take them."

However, there is also a common veterinarians' devotion to volunteers, exemplified by codes such as *Positive emotions*, *Role in the preservation of animal rights*, and *Beliefs about homeless animals' rights*. Like volunteers, doctors hold the belief that homeless animals possess inherent rights (some sources argue that it is more accurate to refer to them as "freedoms" rather than "rights"), which are frequently constrained or violated because of human actions. Considering comparing the rights of domestic and homeless animals, several veterinarians claimed

that domestic animals also lack certain rights that stray animals possess, such as the freedom to hunt and take extensive walks. *"I think that stray cats that live outdoors are happier than cats that live in one-room apartments and can't go anywhere. This is just my view, though."* The belief in the inherent rights or freedoms of homeless animals supports the broader ethical framework within which veterinarians operate, as elucidated by Graaf (2005) and McGlacken, Anderson, & Hobson-West (2023). This framework emphasises the advocacy role of veterinarians, not only in relation to pets but also to homeless animals, linking their professional obligations to wider animal welfare objectives.

While examining veterinarians' perspectives on their role in addressing violence against homeless animals, NVivo provided a visualisation that highlighted the key role of veterinarians in educating pet owners and society. According to the respondents, the veterinarian's function is defined by expertise, since the owner lacks or has minimal knowledge about the animals, making it challenging for them to comprehend some aspects. This issue is not only pertinent to medical treatment and animal welfare but also from the perspective of environmental health. By addressing the health of individual patients, it contributes to the overall wellbeing of society. An example of this is the prevention of zoonotic diseases. This educational role of veterinarians is crucial, as highlighted by Dolby & Litster (2015), who argue that veterinarians should not only be seen as medical professionals but also as educators who can influence public perceptions and behaviours towards animal welfare. This dual role can help bridge the gap between veterinary practice and animal rights activism.

Semi-structured interviews allowed the building of trust with respondents and enabled the exploration of intricate intersections between perspectives on the rights of homeless animals and their choices within the context of medical reality. All informants acknowledge the existence of rights (or freedoms) in homeless animals, which are violated by individuals (including former owners) in numerous ways. The empathetic dedication to animals in need of medical assistance, along with an understanding of their role in helping reduce pain, confronts the challenging truth of the monetary costs of veterinary medicine. This growing mental load and the resulting burnout are critical issues that reflect the broader ethical quandaries and emotional burdens faced by veterinarians, as detailed by Moses, Malowney, & Wesley Boyd (2018). Although the veterinarian's main mission is for the welfare of animals rather than focus on financial concerns, our study revealed that they experience a growing mental load when faced

with ethical challenges while providing medical care within their limitations. Exploring burnout concerning these emotions could serve as a compelling subject for future research.

Examining the overlap of perspectives on the role in decreasing violence, the themes *Primary obligation of the profession*, *Driving force behind choosing a profession*, and *Essential steps to mitigate violence* were discussed. Additionally, the *Pain* code was included in the analysis as it highlighted the narrative about the veterinarians' role in reducing pain, which was frequently addressed in the interviews. *"The longer I work in this field, the more often I ask myself: 'What is the point of this?' It is worth getting up and going to work in the morning to reduce the pain and to make the animal's life better. It is the only reason I have found."*

The Matrix Coding Query revealed that veterinarians consider educating owners, advocating animals' rights, and minimising pain to be in line with their core professional responsibilities. Based on the studies we previously examined, we focused on vets as animal lawyers' representation and on the perception of animals as patients. The perception of animals as patients might influence their treatment and reflect their status, similar to that of human patients. This perception aligns with the biocentric model described by Rollin (2006), which views animals as moral beings deserving of ethical consideration similar to humans.

To explore the correlation between veterinarians' view of their position and their actual actions in aiding homeless animals, as well as the factors that influence their decision-making process, including ethical dilemmas, we conducted a Word Frequency Query. The text displayed the commonly utilised phrase "of course". The text search revealed that the usage context is associated with assisting a homeless animal, irrespective of material resources. When doctors encounter financial challenges, they may turn to volunteer organisations for material assistance or opt for the most affordable medication, but never refuse to provide help to the wounded animal. The Matrix Coding Query revealed that the main factor in the decision to provide treatment for wounded or ill homeless animals is the level of pain they experience. The analysis also demonstrates that respondents believe in the idea that there is no distinction between a companion animal and a stray animal. Consequently, they argue that the medical treatment provided should be equivalent for both. *"We fight for strays just as much as we fight for pets. The question of who will pay for it is another thing. We try our best, but we can only do so much with the money we have."*

When examining ethical dilemmas, it becomes evident that there is a significant correlation with

Emotion codes, particularly - negative emotions. Therefore, it can be assumed that ethical challenges involving stray animals elicit negative emotions in veterinarians. "Working as a vet is a very dangerous occupation when it comes to suicide. I believe the reason for that is quite easy to understand. The reason you studied, and your goal are very opposite to your daily routine. In other words, moral questions mean that you cannot just make choices based on what you know and what is best for the animal."

However, when resolving these dilemmas, doctors are guided by their values regarding the rights of domestic and stray animals, which shape their beliefs about the moral worth of the animals. Additionally, their actions are influenced by their beliefs about the vets' role in advocating for animal rights and the primary objective of the profession.

Conclusions

A study conducted in 2023 has extensively examined the viewpoints of veterinarians regarding their involvement in addressing violence against homeless animals, and the ethical dilemmas they encounter treating stray animals, and has revealed the complex nature of vets' interactions with animal rights volunteer organisations. The study clarifies the complexity of the relationships between veterinarians and volunteer organisations, highlighting positive views of volunteers' altruistic objectives with widespread concerns over money issues and the evident abuse of animals for fundraising purposes. The topic of charging for medical care provided to stray animals has become a prominent subject, highlighting the possibility of differences in comprehension between doctors and activists. Moreover, the notion of volunteering being treated as a sort of business creates doubt among veterinarians, giving rise to doubts about the strategies used to attract donations. Future studies ought to include an in-depth review of the financial obstacles encountered by veterinarians, especially the financial strains and their influence on decision-making related to providing medical aid to homeless animals. This may involve a quantitative analysis of the financial strain on veterinary practices and possible approaches for obtaining financial support.

Another potential focus of the study could be to investigate the level of transparency and ethical behaviour expressed by volunteer organisations engaged in caring for homeless animals, to examine the methods used to raise funds, the use of images, and the degree to which the goals of the organisation are in line with the overall welfare of animals. This research has the potential to provide valuable insights that can be used to establish clear and precise standards for acceptable conduct inside volunteer groups.

It is necessary to acknowledge certain limitations of the study. Respondents might express social desirability bias, wherein they may offer responses that are deemed socially acceptable or conform to societal norms, rather than expressing their genuine feelings or experiences. This could influence the accuracy and sincerity of the data gathered. Participants may encounter recall bias when recalling earlier events or scenarios. This could potentially affect the precision of their memories and the information provided during interviews, especially about their emotions. Also, the study may not fully cover ethical issues and challenges faced by veterinarians, and moral views may differ across different respondents. A deeper investigation of the ethical framework and standards in veterinary practice could yield a more complex understanding.

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