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Comments on the dilemma in the September issue: “Off colour” alpaca’

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Abstract

The dilemma in the September issue concerned an ‘off colour’ alpaca in a paddock next to the one you were working in; you were attending to one of your client's sheep. The owner told you that the alpaca had been ‘off colour’ recently, but when you offered to examine the animal, the owner refused. You were aware that the area had a high rate of TB and had recently had a TB breakdown in a group of alpacas (*IP*, September 2015, vol 37, pp 430-431). Andrea Turner suggested that a possible way forward might be to phone the owner in a couple of days to check up on the animal. If there was no improvement or the animal had deteriorated, and the owner still refused a visit, you could highlight that the welfare of the animal was likely to have been compromised and that it was possible that it might be suffering from bovine TB. Biosecurity and isolation of the animal should be discussed, along with the possibility of voluntary TB testing. Mentioning that the RSPCA might have to be involved on animal welfare grounds, or the APHA due to potential TB infection, might be enough to persuade the owner to allow you to examine the animal.

One of the central unresolved issues in this case was just how much moral obligation we have to try to examine an apparently sick animal against the owner's wishes. Outside the veterinary sphere, the question of whether we should help other people, and whether some of us have additional or particular obligations to do so, is contested. While few would argue that helping others is not somehow ‘good’ or ‘virtuous’, it is this element of obligation, and its extent, that is questioned. In this case, even if we accept that it would be desirable to try and help the alpaca, especially given our particular ability of our veterinary training, there is the complication of this conflicting with what the owner wants. That the owner has the legal responsibility for the welfare of their animal in this situation is clear; however, only a minority of respondents to the poll suggested that should be reflected in the vet's actions. The motivations of the majority of respondents who felt that some attempts to persuade the owner to examine the animal may reflect the desirability, rather than strict obligation, to help others, or may have been an attempt to reconcile this desire with a respect for the owner's autonomy. These respondents may have made a different choice if the animal had been unowned, for example a wild animal involved in a collision with a car. The respondents who felt that the vet should do everything reasonable to examine the alpaca may have considered helping others a basic duty. While few of us will go as far as making our own lives less comfortable to help others, perhaps it's worth remembering that helping is desirable, and that we have particular skills in society that can be helpful, and always that something is better than nothing.