Ethics for Vets – Can ethics help to improve animal disease control?

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Introduction

During major animal disease outbreaks in the EU controversial discussions arose about the ethical soundness of current eradication strategies such as mass culling and alternatives such as vaccination. However, the basic ethical question "*what should I do, **all** things considered?"* is difficult to answer for veterinarians predominantly trained in disease (outbreak) control.

What is applied ethics?

Applied ethics is a subdiscipline of normative ethics which seeks to answer the question „what is right and what is wrong?". Focussed on the examination of conflicts in various fields of life, the main task of applied ethics could be described as to analyze conflicts and to help to develop solutions for particular contentious issues.

Ethical tools

In order to approach a contentious issue in a transparent, structured and practical way, two ethical tools were used:

- *Ethical Matrix (EM) from Ben Mepham*
- *Animal Disease Intervention Matrix (ADIM) from Stef Aerts*

The contentious issue chosen was the compulsory mass-vaccination against BTV-8 in Switzerland in 2008/2009. In workshops, moderated expert and round table discussions with veterinarians, ethicists and agricultural experts these ethical tools were assessed preliminary.

Workshops

In order to identify the existing ethical dilemmas, interdisciplinary workshops with ethicists and veterinarians from Switzerland, Germany and Austria were initiated.

"Vets caught between ethical issues and control policies"

The discussions revealed that in an emergency situation like a contagious animal disease outbreak, official veterinarians are faced with various tasks and corresponding conflicting responsibilities. In some cases a clear lack of expertise and competence to tackle ethical dilemmas was identified. The most prominent ethical dilemma was found in the attention paid to an efficient and fast disease control including culling interventions and animal welfare questions. Further, concerning potential role conflicts of official veterinarians, three different and not necessarily congruent veterinary role models evolved, those of:

(i) the general public (society)
(ii) the veterinary professional organizations
(iii) the self-perception of the individual veterinarian

Additionally, an unsolved question became evident: whereas the perpective of animal welfare ethics is focused on the individual animal (where transgressions are to be found on individuals) it remains open for discussion how this perspective could be extended to animal populations.

" Vets caught between ethics and killing of animals"

Regarding recent changements of the Swiss legislation concerning animals and the "dignity of creature" concept, three dimensions became obvious when questioning about the (un-)justified killing of animals. Whereas the first two dimensions are focused on the animal's life (future and past) or the "telos", the third dimension incorporates the dignity concept and the human-animal-bond.

Ethical Matrix (EM) from Ben Mepham

Source: www.ethicalmatrix.net/matrices/matrixdefined.htm

In an EM, the complexity of ethical deliberation is reduced by dividing the problem along two different dimensions. The first dimension (columns) considers relevant ethical principles. In the context of biomedical ethics, they were introduced by Beauchamp and Childress (2001) as „beneficence, non-maleficence, justice and autonomy". The second dimension refers to relevant stakeholders. The ethical issues connected to the contentious issue being analysed will then be represented by the cells. The analysis itself consists in deciding -cell by cell- whether and how the principles have been respected. The results of a workshop focussed on the ethical dilemmas of BTV-8 compulsory mass vaccination are shown in table 1.

The EM could be useful to get an overview of the interest of different stakeholder involved, but it is rather an analytical tool, not a decision tool.

Table 1: Ethical matrix and BTV-8 mass-vaccination

	Benefit/Welfare	Harm/Suffering	Fairness/Justice	Autonomy/ Choice
Animals	immunity, disease protection survival	stress due to vaccination, side effects	not differential, same right to be protected	none
Animal Owners	protection, economic benefit, care for the animal, protection of genetic material	direct and indirect costs, effort, uncertainty about side effects	comparison with animal holders of other species, regional differences, EU	paternalism
Official Vets	„reason-to-be" for an official vet	conflict situation, more work		paternalism
Practical Vets	working place, earning money, „reason-to-be"	conflict situation, more work, risk, not well paid	comparison to small animal practitionner	depends
Society/Tax Payer	avoid negative economic impact of disease, cheap food, media stories	costs, fears, lacking information, taxes	not directly	none
Industry	economic benefit	more effort	yes	yes
Trade	possibility for trade	loss of possibility for trade, more bureaucracy, export limitations	yes, have been involved	depends
Organizations	economic benefit	loss of genetic material, internal conflict of interest	yes, have been involved	none

Animal Disease Intervention Matrix (ADIM)

The ADIM was originally developed for a potential H5N1 outbreak in Belgium (Aerts, 2006). The ADIM aims to identify the ethically best animal disease intervention scenario. In order to segment the general problem into smaller parts, 15 different objectives that a good disease control scenario should achieve have been identified. In the ADIM the impact of different disease control scenarios or methods on the objectives is assessed by answering indicator questions and assigning a score to them. Finally an overall score for every scenario is given (Figure 1).

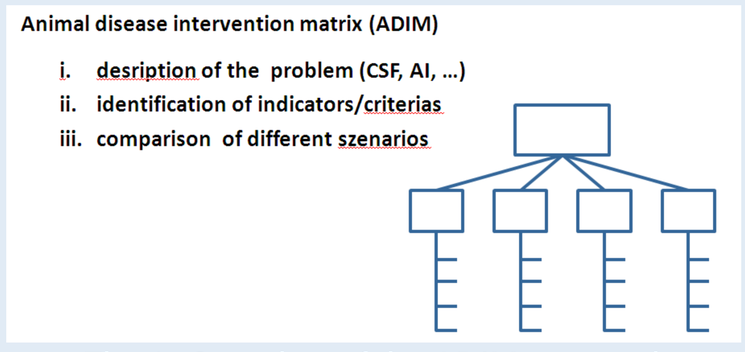

Fig. 1: Overview of the ADIM approach

During two different workshops with veterinarians and experts from agriculture, it became evident, that the ADIM offers the possibility to approach the com-plex issue of BTV-8 vaccination in a structured and transparent way and even allows to respect controversial point of views.

Some of the indicator questions of the ADIM are clearly focussed on H5N1 and could be amended in order to be applied to BTV-8 mass vaccination scenarios. Interestingly the two workshops with different stakeholders yielded similar results.

Conclusions:

Whereas in human medicine, a public health ethics, distinct from medical ethics, has recently evolved, no explicit veterinary public health ethics seems to be "emerging" so far. The conclusions of the abovementioned workshops and the approach taken in the systems we discussed here at least suggest that ethics and ethical thinking can have a profound impact on how disease control is executed *and* perceived.

Ref.:
Aerts, S. (2006): Practice-oriented ethical models to bridge animal production, ethics and society. Thesis, Leuven.
Beauchamp, T. L., Childress, J. F., (2001): Principles of biomedical ethics. New York, Oxford University Press
Mepham, B. (2008): Bioethics, an introduction for the biosciences. Oxford University Press