

# When is the right time?

Veterinary medicine is veering further towards prolongation of life at all costs, without the safeguard of being able to robustly measure quality of life. **Jacky Reid, Andrea Nolan and Marian Scott** discuss major steps forward in the ability to measure changes in health-related quality of life.

ETHICALLY, ever-improving medical options sit within a Pandora's Box of potential challenges for veterinary science, and the profession has yet to fully address these as public expectation alters in line with the full range of emerging scientific possibilities.

Over the past three decades, small animal practitioners have seen an increase in the geriatric population of dogs and cats, resulting in more frequent presentations of painful, chronic conditions, such as osteoarthritis and cancer.

Chronic disease frequently has a significant impact on an animal's health-related quality of life (HRQL), as it does in people. The term and concept of HRQL is beginning to become familiar in veterinary medicine too, where the focus on subjective quality of life 'raises the bar' in terms of animal welfare.

Increasingly sophisticated therapeutic interventions are being developed, including radical surgical techniques and chemotherapeutic options.

Euthanasia, or the 'humane end point' for animals is a moral minefield in the face of improving medicine and ability to prolong life. Never has the notion of determining quality of life been more salient. Even the language is emotive. We talk of 'putting pets to sleep' and 'putting animals down'. Such euphemisms may soften the blow of losing a beloved animal, but perhaps we need a new phrase; one which respects the fact that this is a decision of last

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resort, which ought to reflect entirely the vet's commitment to the best interests of an animal.

Vets are under increasing pressure to prolong pets' lives at all costs. Batchelor and McKeegan<sup>1</sup> reported that of three ethical

dilemmas presented to a group of practising vets, the 'client wishing to continue treatment despite poor animal welfare' was rated as the most stressful on a scale of 0 to 10 (median 9).

In people, the perception of pain and distress, loss of dignity and self-determination cause concern and anxiety, both for the individuals and for those caring for them. It's a conundrum with a myriad of legal, moral, religious, ethical and emotional elements for people; it's essential that the veterinary profession rises to these challenges and consolidates its position to avoid falling into the trap of perhaps

## MEASURING HRQL IN VETERINARY PRACTICE

Vetmetrica ([www.vetmetrica.com](http://www.vetmetrica.com)) is an online system used to measure HRQL in dogs. The current version involves owners answering 22 questions about their dog's behaviour. The questionnaire takes around five minutes to complete and can be done at home using a computer, tablet or smartphone. The system instantaneously generates a profile of the dog's quality of life (QOL) with scores in four domains – energy, happiness, comfort and calmness – which is immediately available to the vet online.

The system has a variety of advantages for clinical practice including:

- It raises the profile of preventive veterinary medicine within a health and wellness model of veterinary care, giving the owner confidence in the dog's health status in between routine vet visits
- Streamlines the consultation process and enhances communication with clients
- Establishes stronger bonds with clients as partners in their animals' healthcare
- Improves disease detection
- Adds another dimension to the monitoring of treatment of chronic disease, supplementing subjective owner report with measurement, the outcomes of which can be treated statistically to provide an evidence base
  - o Vets can set assessment intervals to suit their own clinical purpose
  - o Used longitudinally the scores will help to determine improvement with treatment or decline with disease progression
  - o Age-matched norms provide a reference point for vets to use when treating dogs, providing a means of interpreting the scores
- Facilitates the decision making process at end of life, helping to determine a humane endpoint for individual dogs

A cat HRQL questionnaire instrument is now available. For further details of dog and cat instruments, please e-mail: [jacky.reid@newmetrica.com](mailto:jacky.reid@newmetrica.com)

thinking one thing but being forced by peer- or owner-pressure to do something else.

### Just because we can, should we?

In many situations, people have choices around their therapeutic options. If they are able, they can research the pros and cons and make an informed decision about their own situation.

In veterinary science, that role falls to the owner and the vet, and their joint decision inevitably has considerable quality of life implications for the animal. It may not be very obvious in the animal's behaviour, or acknowledged by an owner desperately trying to save or prolong life in a beloved pet, but quality of life issues can be triggered by treatment as well as by disease.

The radical surgical options and treatments for cancer and other chronic diseases now offered can have both positive and negative impacts on HRQL. They may increase the quantity of life and its overall quality, but they may also have short- or long-term negative impacts upon HRQL that can be substantial. The challenge lies in identifying the extent of largely silent but potentially distressing symptoms (eg, pain, nausea, discomfort, sensory distortion, sleep loss and mental confusion).

It's not just about how disease or pain feels (sensory), it's about how it makes you feel (affective/emotional).

The chief consideration for vets has to be how the animal feels; how much better we can make it feel; how bad it may feel and for how long during treatment. Traditional methods of monitoring this relied on a mixture of clinical examination, experience and owner report. Unfortunately, owner report may be unreliable, as emotions

#### HOW DO YOU ASSESS QUALITY OF LIFE?

Do you think vets should routinely use a tool to assess HRQL?

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get in the way of objectivity, leading to conscious or unconscious bias.

### Measuring HRQL

This problem was the driving force behind VetMetrica (see Box), an online system initially developed at Glasgow university to provide a scientifically robust tool for measuring HRQL using subtle behavioural cues picked up by the owner. Through the measurement of HRQL we can now determine how dogs and cats are feeling, capturing that affective component of the pain/chronic disease experience which, when added to traditional measures of physical limitation, produces a holistic and much more meaningful approach than that which has been the norm for many years.

Regular and reliable HRQL measurement can provide an important opportunity for routine health monitoring of healthy pets between vet visits, engaging owners with their vet practice in a preventive model of healthcare. It can also alert to the onset of diseases, potentially leading to earlier treatment.

As an adjunct to existing clinical practice, the valid, reliable and responsive measurement of HRQL can be used to assess disease impact, monitor clinical change and evaluate treatment efficacy in a more comprehensive and meaningful manner.

HRQL of the animal concerned will be central to such a judgement, but an appropriate evidence base for treatment effectiveness and impact at a population level will also be relevant. Therefore, HRQL instruments also have an important role as outcome measures in trials of new treatments, providing the evidence of an overall positive impact, not only on physical condition, but also on HRQL, which is what matters most to the animal.

### Quality of life over quantity

In the human domain, many individuals recognise the point in friends or family members where artificially prolonging life appears both pointless and heartless.

Veterinary medicine is veering more and more towards prolongation of life at all costs, but without the safeguard of being able to identify quality of life preferences of the animal who may be suffering. In this context the ability to measure changes in HRQL is a major step forward.

End-of-life decisions for a pet elicit much soul-searching to the vast majority of owners. Adding robust and reliable HRQL information can hugely strengthen the decision-making process, as well as helping vets to ensure, and demonstrate, that their interventions lead to the best possible quality of life for patients.

#### Reference

- BATCHELOR CEM, MCKEEGAN DEF. Survey of the frequency and perceived stressfulness of ethical dilemmas encountered in UK veterinary practice. *Vet Record* 2012;170:19