College of Veterinarians of British Columbia

A client brings their cat, Sadie, to Dr. Doe and advises Sadie has been unwell for the last few months. The client informs Dr. Doe that Sadie has been a part of their family her whole life, but they do not feel she has a good quality of life right now with her condition

Dr. Doe assesses Sadie and reviews the options with the client. Dr. Doe advises that euthanasia is a reasonable option. Dr. Doe also advises there are treatment options that would ensure Sadie has a good quality of life. The client informs Dr. Doe that they do not have the money to proceed with the expense of the treatment options as they are on a fixed income and given Sadie's age, they would like to proceed with euthanasia.

The options discussed with the client are documented in the medical record.

Dr. Doe has the client sign paperwork including a consent form for the euthanasia. While signing the paperwork, the client, who is understandably very emotional quickly flips though the pages and signs at the bottom. One of the documents that the client signs is a surrender form under which the client agrees to surrender ownership of Sadie to Dr. Doe's clinic. After signing all of the paperwork, the client says their goodbyes to Sadie and leaves the clinic before the euthanasia.

The concept of surrender was not specifically discussed with the client based on a review of the medical records.

During this time, a staff member at Dr. Doe's clinic who is a cat lover decides that she would like to see Sadie have another chance at life. Because Sadie has been surrendered to the clinic, the staff member advises Dr. Doe that she will pay for Sadie's treatment. Dr. Doe initiates treatment and Sadie's condition improves significantly within a few weeks.

After treatment, Dr. Doe's clinic works with a local animal rescue to rehome Sadie. The client sees that their beloved cat Sadie is up for adoption on the animal rescue's website and calls Dr. Doe. Dr. Doe informs the client that since they surrendered Sadie to the clinic, Dr. Doe elected to perform surgery on Sadie instead of euthanasia and try to rehome her. The client informs Dr. Doe that this is not what they agreed to, and they will be filing a complaint with the CVBC.

This case example highlights a couple of important issues with respect to informed consent.

First, it is important to recognize that clients may be experiencing extremes of emotion, which may interfere with their understanding, cloud their judgement and impact their decision making. Pursuant to section 211(3)(a) of Part 4 of the Bylaws, a registrant must ensure that the client giving consent is capable of making a decision about whether to give or refuse consent to the proposed veterinary service. Accordingly, there may be some circumstances where a client is too emotional to be capable of providing informed consent. In these circumstances, the registrant should give the client some time to calm down and then revisit the discussion about informed consent.

In this case example, the client did sign a form surrendering ownership of Sadie to Dr. Doe's clinic. However, the client, who was very emotional, did not read what she was signing. Section 211(5) of Part 4 of the Bylaws states:

(5) To obtain informed consent from a client for proposed veterinary services, a registrant must ensure that the client is provided with information a reasonable person would require to understand the proposed veterinary service.

In this case, Dr. Doe should have reviewed the forms with the client and clearly communicated that they were surrendering Sadie to the clinic, and the clinic may elect to proceed with treatment rather than euthanasia if care could be provided and a home could be found. This communication should also have been documented in the medical records at the time of the conversation.

In summary, this case highlights the following important points:

- A client needs to be capable of making a decision about whether to give or refuse consent.
- The registrant needs to clearly communicate to the client what exactly are the proposed veterinary services.
- The registrant needs to ensure that the client fully understands what veterinary services they are consenting to.