resulting publicity to adopt out the animal and to solicit donations to cover future cases. If there are too few veterinarians and many such cases, the veterinarian(s) must choose to treat those cases likeliest to have a reasonable outcome and yield an adoptable animal, and utilize euthanasia to mitigate severe suffering or deal with cases with a poor prognosis. Difficult though this may be, it amounts to a situation necessitating triage, and veterinarians must do the best they can without harming themselves physically or financially.

Euthanasia of unwanted animals is a completely different state of affairs. This task flies directly in the face of most veterinarians’ view of their mission to save life and not to take it, except out of medical necessity.

In fact, in my experience, convenience euthanasia is the single major source of job dissatisfaction for veterinarians and technicians, and, indeed, for humane society workers, pound workers, or animal control officers. Killing healthy animals creates a unique sort of stress, highly erosive of physical and mental health and of family life that I have termed “moral stress,” because it results from a major dissonance between what such people who care about animals believe they ought to be doing and what they are, in fact, asked to do.

Millions of such unwanted animals, growing out of human irresponsibility, are killed each year. In my view, no veterinarian, or his or her staff, should be coerced into killing healthy animals at the expense of his or her own well-being. If there is a veterinarian who is willing to contract with the local government to perform this odious task, well and good. But if no one volunteers, the governmental agency needs to establish a local pound staffed by people who go into this work with their eyes open, though, as mentioned, even such people can suffer greatly with prolonged taking of innocent life.

In the end, society ought not make killers of healers. To veterinarians whose lives are devoted to healing and helping animals, the regular and omnipresent need to take innocent life is an unbearable burden society ought not force them to shoulder.

Bernard E. Rollin, PhD

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Ethical question of the month — May 2003

Responses to the case presented are welcome. Please limit your reply to approximately 50 words and mail along with your name and address to: Ethical Choices, c/o Dr. Tim Blackwell, Veterinary Science, Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, Wellington Place, R.R.#1, Fergus, Ontario N1M 2W3; telephone: (519) 846-3413; fax: (519) 846-8101. Suggested ethical questions of the month are also welcome! All ethical questions or scenarios in the ethics column are based on actual events, which are changed, including names, locations, species, etc., to protect the confidentiality of the parties involved.

A new marketing campaign for a castration device emphasizes its use for the banding of bulls at a later age. One advantage cited for this device is its ability to castrate bulls within 120 days of market, thereby allowing the producer to benefit from the natural growth-promoting effects of testosterone for a longer period of time. Several clinics and salesbarns in your area are advocating this new technique. You have reservations regarding the use of the procedure at this age, as there is a possibility of greater distress for bulls castrated at heavier weights. However, your reservations have also been interpreted as your concern that this new technique will cut into your sales of implants. How should you respond?

(Submitted by Clarice Lulai, Barrie, Ontario)