The euthanasia of unwanted greyhounds and the role of veterinarians

By Caroline Hoetzer

There are significant ethical and welfare issues for greyhounds that are a product of the nature of the commercial racing and gambling industry. The greyhound racing industry is not independently regulated and is thus insulated from external scrutiny, which leaves greyhounds vulnerable to exploitation and abuse in an industry which prioritises the commercial profit of owners and trainers over the welfare of the animal (Hoetzer, 2013; The Barristers Animal Welfare Panel, 2013; Lawyers for Companion Animals, 2013). Suburban veterinarians are often ignorant of the internal practices of the racing industry, often only encountering racing greyhounds when owners bring the dogs into the clinic to be euthanised. This state-of-affairs not only keeps the fate of the animals in the hands of the industry that exploits them, but also presents unique ethical and welfare concerns for veterinarians as it requires them, individually and as a profession, to decide what role they are to play in the greyhound racing industry.

Unlike other canine patients, greyhounds are usually regarded and treated as commercial assets rather than beloved family pets, and the owner has every right in law to dispose of their asset at will, as long as this is humanely done (Hoetzer, 2013; McEwan & Skandakumar, 2011). Greyhounds generally have a two year racing career, beginning at around 18 months and ending at around 4 years of age (Cockington, 2012). This short racing career is fraught with danger, given the perilous nature of the race itself to greyhound welfare. Greyhound Freedom (2013) reported in a submission to the NSW Parliamentary Inquiry that stewards’ reports from TAB tracks in NSW revealed that from January 2012 to September 2013, 532 greyhounds fractured a bone during a race and 324 greyhounds died at the track. Survivors of this short career are then often no longer wanted by their owners or trainers. Greyhound Racing NSW admitted that over 3,000 greyhounds are put down in NSW alone each year because they are deemed “too slow”, have been injured racing or training, are not desired for breeding purposes, or have reached the end of their racing career (Jones, 2005; McDonald, 2012). This is likely to be a conservative estimate of the true number of greyhounds killed each year.

Greyhound Freedom (2013) determined that from 2003 to 2011, 80,133 greyhounds were born in NSW. In 2012, there were only 2,552 greyhounds registered as pets and 6150 greyhounds registered as racing greyhounds. Since greyhounds usually live 10-12 years, this leaves a lot of greyhounds unaccounted for.

Poor welfare outcomes persist in the greyhound racing industry due to the nature of the industry, with its primary purpose of profit through gambling. Since 2000, and most recently in 2013, investigations into the integrity of the greyhound industry have exposed ethical and welfare concerns regarding greyhounds that penetrate every level of the racing industry (ICAC, 2000; Lewis, 2008; Scott 2008; Select Committee on Greyhound Racing in NSW, 2014). Anti-cruelty legislation such as the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979 (NSW) does little to protect the welfare of greyhounds in the racing industry. The racing of greyhounds is itself not an offence under the Act, and the killing of an animal is also not unlawful per se: so long as the pain and suffering inflicted on the animal during the act of killing does not amount to cruelty, it is lawful for an owner to dispose of their personal property (McEwan & Skandakumar, 2011). The Greyhound Racing Rules (2013) require notification to the
racing board of the death or disposal of registered greyhounds, however it does not go so far as to require humane euthanasia. When humane euthanasia is sought, the veterinarian then becomes entangled in the industry’s dirty deeds, and the ethical dilemmas they bring. Veterinarians are called upon to euthanise young and/or otherwise healthy greyhounds that are deemed no longer useful or desirable to the racing industry (McDonald, 2012).

Whilst the euthanasia of animals is accepted by the veterinary profession as an ethical means to end suffering, the performance of euthanasia by practitioners is a morally complex and stressful part of veterinary practice (Yeates and Main, 2011). In the case of greyhounds, euthanasia is sought on the basis of either poor performance or due to injuries sustained during racing or training; hence the greyhound is a victim twice over, either to be killed for no fault of its own or as a result of the industry’s dirty deeds. This is a morally ambiguous equation, intimately tied to the nature of the racing industry which commercially exploits greyhounds for a profit-making purpose. The veterinarian is brought into the equation as the moral gatekeeper of the decision to euthanise. In a study of veterinarians’ experiences with the euthanasia of companion animals, it was found that although opinions regarding the ethics of euthanasia varied among practitioners, most practitioners focused on the welfare of their patient in order to make their decision (Yeates & Main, 2011). Rebuelto (2008) described the issue of euthanasia in veterinary practice as a field “which there are many conflicts for taking the right decision and justifying the election”, since there are different views about the importance of an animal’s life and the legitimacy of reasons for euthanasia (Yeates & Main, 2011).

The resolution of the ethical dilemma of whether or not to euthanise an unwanted greyhound will depend greatly on the veterinarian’s individual views about the value of animal life (Sandoe and Christiansen, 2007; Rebuelto, 2008). If the veterinarian’s view is that animals are items of personal property, to be disposed of at will by owners, as they are legally able to be, then veterinarians will consider their role to be to carry out the instructions of the greyhound owner and provide humane euthanasia. In the study by Yeates and Main (2011) several veterinarians reported always euthanising a dog when requested to by the owner. For many veterinarians, greyhounds are not seen as being the same as the family pet, as they are industry animals, which are ordinarily kept for human use and routinely slaughtered when that purpose is called upon (for example in the food, leather, or animal by-product industries) (for example see Tiplady, 2014).

Fortunately, this Orwellian delineation between greyhounds and other breeds of dog is a view not shared by all. Many companion animal veterinarians morally object to euthanising healthy animals for the convenience of their owners (Rebuelto, 2008; Yeates & Main, 2011), described by Rollin (2011) as a “moral stress”. Rollin (2011) considers convenience euthanasia to be morally reprehensible and against the very essence of the veterinary profession, the goal of which is to alleviate pain and maximise the health and quality of life of the animal. A veterinarian has a professional obligation towards their patient’s welfare (Rebuelto, 2008). Sandoe and Christiansen (2007) present the view that the quality and quantity of an animal’s life matter and the euthanasia of a young and healthy animal will make a “negative moral contribution” to the integrity of veterinary practice. Thus from this we may say that the role of veterinarians is to be an advocate for the welfare of the animal. In the interests of the patient, the role of the veterinarian should be to oppose the instructions of the owner to euthanise the dog, and to actively encourage and even assist the greyhound owner to surrender the dog to a greyhound rescue group for rehabilitation and rehoming. This role of the
veterinarian delivers better welfare outcomes for the greyhound than the wanton destruction of life. It is acknowledged that the role of the veterinarian becomes more complex when the greyhound owner refuses to rehome the dog, and threatens to take their dog elsewhere to be euthanised or worse, dispose of the dog by their own means. This is a complex ethical dilemma not uncommon in veterinary practice, and cannot easily be resolved given the status of animals as property in the Australian legal system (see for example Rosenberg, 2013). Clear leadership from the Australian veterinary profession would go a long way in empowering veterinarians faced with the ethical dilemma of convenience euthanasia, as current professional policy offers minimal guidance to veterinarians when euthanasia is not in the best interest of the patient (see Code of Professional Conduct, r 2; Australian Veterinary Association, Policy 4.4).

In conclusion, veterinarians individually and the profession as a whole can play an important role in improving the welfare of greyhounds discarded from the racing industry by refusing to perform euthanasia for the convenience of owners. Acceding to the wishes of the owner, as a paying customer, with no regard for the best interests of the animal, ignores the practitioner’s professional obligations to the patient and, as Rollin (2002) states, makes the role of the veterinarian as akin to a garage mechanic. The role of the veterinarian should be more akin to a paediatrician, and as such the canine patient’s welfare should be the practitioner’s constant endeavour (Rollin, 2002; 2006). In the bigger picture, the veterinary profession as a whole needs to stand side-by-side with greyhound rescue groups in lobbying the state government and greyhound racing bodies to reduce the number of greyhounds disposed of each year and importantly, reduce the overall number of greyhounds bred for racing purposes.
References


Rebuelto, M (2008) Ethical dilemmas in euthanasia of small companion animals, *The Open Ethics Journal*, 2: 21-25


