

NOVA SCOTIA VETERINARY MEDICAL ASSOCIATION

SUMMARY OF DECISION OF COMPLAINTS COMMITTEE

Dr. Sietse Van Zwol

The Complaints Committee of the Nova Scotia Veterinary Medical Association has reached agreement with Dr. Sietse Van Zwol respecting the outcome of a complaint, and other matters reviewed by the Committee in the course of investigating the complaint.

Background

The subject of the complaint is the treatment of the complainant's dog, Cooper, on August 4, 2020. The complaint describes Cooper as an 8 year old Husky who had some abnormalities in his paw and hind leg in the days leading into August 4, 2020. The Complainant brought Cooper to the Highland Animal Hospital in Ingonish for assessment.

The complainant describes knocking on the door of the Hospital on arrival and then waiting in her car for a staff person to arrive at her vehicle, in accordance with COVID-19 precautions. She describes a staff member of the Hospital attending at her vehicle and providing her with an information form to complete. The form required information such as name, date of birth, sex but no information respecting the presenting complaint.

The complainant describes Dr. Van Zwol attending at her vehicle approximately 10-15 minutes later and instructing her to put Cooper on the back of her truck. He sought permission to give an injection to Cooper to relax him and to prevent being bitten. The Complainant consented to that injection. She then describes Dr. Van Zwol leaving and returning some minutes later, and injecting Cooper with a second needle. She states he gave no explanation for this procedure.

The complainant then realized that Cooper had been euthanized and demanded an explanation. Dr. Van Zwol apologized for mistakenly euthanizing Cooper and noted he had three dogs to euthanize that day. He offered to cover the cost of cremating Cooper due to his error.

In his response to the complaint, Dr. Van Zwol apologized for the loss of Cooper and for the pain he had caused the complainant. He hoped the complainant would understand "this honest error." He also apologized to the NSVMA and veterinary colleagues.

Dr. Van Zwol described that on August 4, 2020, he had three dogs scheduled for euthanasia, with owners requesting to remain for the procedures. He completed the first euthanasia, following which the complainant arrived with Cooper. He describes his voluntary attendant going to the vehicle to have a form completed. He notes he was not acquainted with the complainant or Cooper.

Dr. Van Zwol indicates he asked the complainant if the papers were filled out and she indicated his attendant had done that earlier. Since there were no other dogs in attendance, Dr. Van Zwol assumed Cooper was there to be euthanized and asked the complainant if he could give a sedative, to which she agreed. He states he then prepared the euthanasia solution, asked the complainant if she was sure she wanted to proceed, to which she replied with a “yes”. Due to the complainant’s reaction, he quickly realized that a mistake had been made, apologized profusely and offered to buy her another dog.

In the complainant’s reply to Dr. Van Zwol’s response, she indicated she assumed that Dr. Van Zwol, when asking if she wanted to continue, was asking her if she wanted to continue with bloodwork being done. She disagrees he offered to buy her another dog.

Process of the Complaints Committee

After considering the information provided by the complainant and Dr. Van Zwol, and other information gathered in the course of the investigation, the Committee reviewed the records for other appointments on the same date as the events involving Cooper. A number of concerns were identified by the Committee respecting the records that were reviewed, including the lack of information such as differential diagnoses and treatment plan options. There was no record of communication with clients about exam findings and treatment options.

As a result of this review, the Committee ordered a more extensive audit of Dr. Van Zwol’s medical records. This audit raised a number of additional concerns respecting deficiencies in Dr. Van Zwol’s practice, principally relating to poor record keeping, lack of justification for diagnoses and treatment, minimal diagnostics being performed or recommended, and medication concerns.

Decision of Committee

Euthanasia is an intentional act that results in an absolute, irreversible end of a life, leaving no room for error. There should be protocols and procedures in place to safeguard against accidental euthanasia. One should not be able to “mistakenly” kill an animal as this would imply those safeguarding protocols and procedures have been overlooked, disregarded, or simply ignored. To euthanize an animal that was not intended to be euthanized should not be seen as an accident, but rather as an act of negligence.

The Panel was particularly concerned in light of Dr. Van Zwol’s history with the NSVMA where there were issues of communication, medical records and standard of care deficiencies previously addressed on a number of occasions.

When considering the serious error of Dr. Van Zwol arising from his care of Cooper, in the context of his prior disciplinary history, the results of the audit, and his proximity to retirement, the Panel proposed to Dr. Van Zwol, and he has accepted the following resolution of the complaint and audit:

1. Dr. Van Zwol provided an undertaking during the investigative process not to engage in euthanasias effective from a date agreed by the Panel;
2. Dr. Van Zwol provided an undertaking during the investigative process to practice only under supervision of veterinarians approved by the NSVMA, effective on a date agreed by the Panel;
3. Dr. Van Zwol has Consented to a reprimand by the Panel for failing to meet the standards of practice in his care of Cooper, and for the deficiencies identified during the audit process;
4. Dr. Van Zwol has agreed to retire as of 5 pm, July 9, 2021, and agrees that his retirement is a permanent one. He undertakes not to apply for a license to practice veterinary medicine in Nova Scotia or any other jurisdiction;
5. In the event the NSVMA becomes aware that, contrary to the above, Dr. Van Zwol has applied for registration or licensing in any other jurisdiction, the Association will advise the other regulatory body that he retired with outstanding complaints. The Association will disclose all information gathered in the course of its investigation;
6. Effective on his retirement date, Dr. Van Zwol undertakes not to engage in the practice of veterinary medicine, in any form, which includes not only the clinical practices and procedures usually performed by a veterinarian, but also the related promotion of health and prevention of illness of animals that falls within the meaning of this term. In short, effective on his retirement date, he is prohibited from engaging in any aspect of the practice of veterinary medicine.

The Complaints Panel has determined that the above resolution is in the public interest, and has concluded the matter.