

Ethics of Pirated Drug Use and How do You Deal with it in Your Practice

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Over the past 13 years, I have examined some 150 ethical issues that arise in veterinary medicine, either directly in my *Canadian Veterinary Journal* column or in the ethics column I edit for the *Veterinary Forum*. While some of these issues represent true dilemmas, with strong arguments that can be marshalled on each side, many others are quite straightforward and their ethical resolution is unambiguous.

I cannot think of a better example of an issue with clear ethical resolution than the one facing us in this discussion—the use of counterfeit (pirated) drugs—where veterinarians dispense copies of established veterinary drugs. The basic reason this is a problem is that drugs compounded from bulk ingredients—unlike the branded (FDA approved) products or approved US generic equivalents—do not undergo FDA approved testing for safety and efficacy, and are not produced under conditions that conform to FDA's Good Manufacturing Practices. In my view, dispensing such drugs, as done by many veterinarians to increase profit well above what they can make with approved drugs, violates every sort of moral obligation inherent in veterinary medical ethics.

Veterinarians, by virtue of their profession, have moral obligations to clients, animals, peers and the profession, themselves and society in general. A brief examination of each of these categories will make manifest that the use of counterfeit drugs is paradigmatically violative of all aspects of veterinary ethics.

Using untested, non-quality-controlled drugs violates a veterinarian's obligation to the animal patient, as these drugs may be ineffective or even dangerous. For example, CBS News reported that in 1995 counterfeit cough medicine killed 89 people in Haiti, and counterfeit gentamicin caused 66 deaths and numerous cases of irreversible severe reactions. Since owner and animal interest coincide in treating disease, using counterfeit drugs that may be ineffective or harmful also harms the client, whose interest is in treating a sick animal.

In the same vein, dispensing such medication violates veterinarians' obligations to society, under whose aegis veterinarians are chartered as professionals. The Veterinarian's Oath tells us that veterinarians are charged with using their scientific knowledge to benefit

society. Insofar as science has shown the inefficacy and dangers of counterfeit drugs, dispensing them violates society's trust in veterinarians who, in using such drugs, place self-interest over obligation. For precisely the same reason, counterfeit drug use violates a practitioner's obligation to peers and the profession, by eroding public trust in veterinary medicine.

Finally, though such drug dispensing may bring significant profit to the practitioner in the short run, in the long run dispensing these dangerous drugs can erode a clinician's credibility if the drugs in question fail the tests of safety and/or efficacy and this becomes known. A clinician's reputation is too hard-won and precious a commodity to risk it for the sake of greed.

How to Deal With the Pirated Drug Issue and Your Clients

Let's explore a few scenarios.

Scenario 1: A client comes to you and says, "I want you to use that generic Gastrogard or Ventipulmin. It's a lot cheaper".

Your response could be: "There are no approved generic formulations of these drugs. Whoever told you that (unfortunately it may have been you) misled you. I only use quality products in my practice." You explain the issue. You identify that the pirated stuff is substandard and that you don't practice veterinary medicine in a substandard manner. You might even throw in the legalities of the problem. If the client says, "Wow, I didn't know that, thank you doctor, my horse, dog, etc. should have the best, and I would not want you to break the law," then you have won a client you should cherish. If you lose the client because they want the "cheap stuff" and care very little that you put yourself at legal and liability risk, then you have lost a client you did not need. Send them to your cheap, substandard, illegal-drug-dispensing competitor.

Scenario 2: A client comes to you and says, "Why are you using Adequan™ or Legend™ instead of the generic (i.e., Chondrodefect, or MAPmy wallet5, or LoCoat or NonCell) for use in my horse or dog?" I would suggest telling them that the others are bandages for

wounds, or freezer wrap for sperm, and that they were never intended to go beneath skin of any animal. At this point a sarcastic chuckle may be useful. Explain that to use those devices as drugs would imply that you were a poorly educated shill or worse, that practice would imply you cared nothing about your clients and their animals, and were just greedy. If you keep the client, great; if you lose the client, great.

Scenario 3: A client comes to you and says, "I read how evil it is to use pirated drugs in horses. You are using dipyrone to treat my horse. Is that wrong?" I would

suggest you say that "There is no approved dipyrone, but it is well accepted that this drug controls high fevers much better than any other drug on the market. If there were an approved form, then the use of compounded dipyrone would be substandard care, but since there is none, its use is more than acceptable and clinically intelligent."

There are many more scenarios with similar answers. Basically, present quality; don't peddle substandard care.