Difficult choices on return to Nepal

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Russell Lyon faced some tough situations during his latest trip to Nepal, but was happy to be rewarded by knowing his actions benefited many animals.

There must be a lot of threelegged cows in Pokhara, the second largest city in Nepal, where HART (Himalayan Animal Rescue Trust) has its headquarters.

I had heard about these unfortunate beasts on a previous trip, but had not seen one. On this visit I saw two within 10 minutes. If Pokhara has at least two such animals, there must be countless more in Kathmandu and throughout Nepal.

These injured animals are the consequence of traffic congestion, appalling driving, and cows and water buffaloes wandering the streets at will foraging for food from the countless bags of discarded food and other debris that pollute the streets.

No euthanasia

If a cow is injured in a road traffic accident, the animal cannot be euthanised – no matter how severely it is injured. Cows are venerated in the Hindu religion and must be saved at all costs. Unfortunately, it is the cow that bears the cost of this worship and it can suffer terribly before it dies. This was brought home to me when I was the duty vet for HART during Tihar, the festival of lights and prosperity, which is a four-day public holiday.

We were requested to visit a cow that had three legs and had aborted its calf as a result on a road traffic accident. The animal was found in a hovel of a building, lying on its side, and judging by its...
pressure sores, it clearly had not moved for a number of days. It was missing part of its left hindlimb, which had been amputated about midshaft of the tibia. The operation had been done some months ago, date unknown, surgeon unknown. The animal had lost its calf about the same time.

The beast was in a terribly dehydrated, emaciated state and clearly unable to move and get to the food and water that had been left close, but not close enough.

My initial reaction was to instantly euthanise the cow but I knew this was just not possible. There is a heavy fine and possible two-year jail sentence for this type of humane reaction. I would gladly take the consequences for myself, but HART would bear the brunt of such an action and would be banned from working in Nepal, to the huge detriment of all the good work it does to alleviate suffering in the animal world.

All we could do for the cow was to prop it up on its brisket and dress its pressure sores. It drank greedily from a large metal bowl of water and managed to eat a saucepan full of a porridge-like mixture of barley meal and water. It had clearly not given up. It had an injection of meloxicam, which was the only available pain-relieving drug, and we had to leave it to its inevitable fate. The boy who was in charge of the cow promised to make sure it had regular drinks and to try to keep it propped up, but the instructions may have lost a lot in translation. When my colleagues, Frances and Audrey, visited next day the cow was clearly worse. It was on its side again and could not or would not drink. We could only hope it would die quickly.

On our return journey, we drove past another cow with three legs. This time it was a right foreleg that was missing, again about the mid-shaft region of the radius. This cow was clearly in good condition and managing well. It was able to hop using its other good front leg and the amputated stump had healed well. For this cow an amputated limb was not a death sentence.

**Amputation needed**

When I started work in the HART small animal clinic in Bharatpur, which is in the Chitwan National Park and close to the Indian border, there was a small dog in the kennels with the lower part of its left hindlimb missing. It was red raw and ulcerated and had been like it for some time as it had been in the kennels for more than a month while the staff treated the stump and hoped it would heal.

It was not clear how the lower leg had been lost – whether it had been amputated or had dropped off as the result of gangrene. What was obvious was what was left of the damaged leg would have to be amputated at the level of the mid-shaft of the femur.

This left me with two problems. I had to persuade the resident Nepali vet that this could and should be done and all that I would need extra for the amputation over and above the routine spay kit was
a hacksaw blade. My veterinary colleague readily agreed when I explained the procedure and why. The hacksaw blade was obtained without a handle from the local hardware store and easily sterilised. The dog's owner was the problem. He took a lot of persuasion before he agreed as he felt the dog needed a "prop." I told him through an interpreter that the stump of the leg after the amputation would heal well and quickly and the dog would be able to run and walk without any difficulty. He was still not convinced until I told a white lie – may the Royal College forgive me. I said I had seen a dog with just two legs and it managed fine. The lie was that I had not seen one – but I had heard about it from a reliable witness. That was the clincher. He agreed.

The leg was removed and next day the dog was running around the kennel area, wagging its tail and eating well. For me the end justified the white lie.

The second amputation I did was to remove the right eye from a black mongrel bitch called Kali. The dog belonged to the same owner and the globe in the orbit of the eye had collapsed, leaving a chronically discharging wound. Kali also needed to be neutered. Again, the owner was initially reluctant as the animal seemed to be quite happy, but I explained the eye socket could very easily become infected and the animal might die as a result, quite apart from the pain and distress it might feel. The clincher was the neutering. I told him we would spay Kali at the same time as operating on the eye and that was enough. What was left of the eye was quite difficult to remove and bled a bit, but I knew it would be okay. The dog's anaesthesia was going well and I gave the nod to my colleagues to start the spay procedure when I had almost finished my part of the procedure.

Neutering is a low right flank operation, which tends to be the standard in Nepal and many other countries where welfare groups operate a catch, neuter vaccinate (against rabies) and release system. The anaesthesia we were using was again fairly standard as it is cheap and easily available – xylazine and ketamine in a ratio of one xylazine to two parts ketamine. The ketamine is half the normal strength we use in the UK.

With both procedures finished satisfactorily, the dog was awake within 30 minutes, but despite meloxicam it was obviously still in some discomfort. I found some tramadol 50mg at the bottom of my toilet bag, which I keep in case my back gives me grief, and Kali benefited greatly from having one twice daily for two days. She was soon happily running around and eating well.

The third case in the kennels was a dog with a broken right front leg. Resident vet Dr Narayan had put a gypsum plaster on the leg, but there was a general feeling the leg was not doing well. The dog was taken to the local hospital for an x-ray, which cost 500 rupees. This was seen as an outrageous amount by our veterinary technicians because a human could have an x-ray for 200 rupees. In Nepal, one pound sterling will buy around 135 rupees.

The x-ray confirmed a complete malunion of the radius and ulna due to the leg not being immobilised properly. The dog was anaesthetised with the standard blend of xylazine and ketamine
and the old plaster removed with plaster shears borrowed from the local hospital. The original cast had not extended the full length of the leg, which was the main part of the problem.

With the dog under general anaesthetic, the leg was extended and the bone reset. If the dog had been treated in the UK it would have had some form of surgical procedure, either internal with bone plating or external fixation with pins. This is just not possible in Nepal and if the bones do not heal or there are some other problems with the cast the only alternative is yet another amputation.

All these cases serve to illustrate the difficulties of working in a third world country with very limited resources. Every example would have been dealt with quite differently and more easily in the UK, but I find living and working abroad is exciting, enthralling and motivating. Working in Nepal is always demanding from a professional viewpoint, but can be ultimately very rewarding.

Well-run organisations such as HART are always looking for vet and nurse volunteers and can be easily contacted through their websites.
The three-legged cow was found in an appalling state.

Another three-legged cow doing well on streets of Pokhara.
Kali had eye enucleation and was spayed at the same time.

A dog with a non-healing leg stump before surgery.
The same dog after surgery to remove its leg.