Letter to the Editor

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Ms. Nadia Vander Gaast, Editor
The ISU Veterinarian
College of Veterinary Medicine
Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa 50011

Dear Ms. Vander Gaast:

The article "The Domestic Ferret: A Guide for The Veterinary Practitioner," by Drs. K. C. Cornish and W. A. Hagemoser in Volume 49, issue Number 2, of The ISU Veterinarian published in 1987 was very well done and the authors are to be complimented. The information provided should be very useful to clinicians who are being presented with an increasing number of ferrets by clients. Some additional comments are in order, however, to emphasize current concern about public health aspects of ferret ownership.

Ferrets are numerous as pets and have been domesticated for about 1,600 years. Applying the terms "domesticated" and "pet" to ferrets, however, creates some confusion because, while they have been kept in close association with human dwellings, they usually have been kept and trained to go into burrows and dens in the hunt for rabbits and for snake and rodent control. Yes, these ferrets have survived for centuries only in captivity. But, in a sense, this is like using falcons to hunt and calling them domesticated pets. Domesticated does not necessarily mean pet, yet, as the authors point out, there are nearly 100,000 households in which ferrets are kept in the United States.

There are some idiosyncrasies in law. In Iowa, for example, keeping ferrets is not contrary to the Iowa law which forbids keeping wildlife in captivity not because the ferret is not a wild animal, but because it is not a wild animal native to Iowa.

Ferrets may attack children. Reports of severe mutilation, biting, and injury to children under five years of age is common. At least one infant has been killed by a ferret. This ferret was a "family pet" when it attacked and killed the two-month-old infant in her crib. Accordingly, pet ferrets should not be maintained in households with preschool children, and particularly not by families with newborn or young infants.

Since 1980, there have been 10 cases of rabid ferret attacks on people in the United States. The tenth case occurred in Iowa during the summer of 1987. Nearly all of these rabid ferrets were kept as pets. In the absence of specific statistics and since ferrets are Mustelidae, we must assume they are highly susceptible to rabies, difficult if not impossible to immunize against the disease, and may shed virus for some several days before clinical signs are apparent. Therefore, pet ferrets should be protected from exposure to potential vectors of rabies.

Please note that ISU Veterinary Medicine Extension, in agreement with American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) policy, does not approve of keeping wildlife animals as pets. Furthermore, the AVMA Council on Public Health and Regulatory Veterinary Medicine has concluded that the ferret, although domesticated as a working animal to hunt rodents and snakes, is wild in nature and is not a suitable household pet. The policy of the International Ferret Association is to not sell a ferret to anyone who has a child under six years old.

Veterinarians are placed in a difficult position by the issue of ferrets as pets. We are the physicians of all animals, including the human at times such as war. On the other hand we serve society and individuals. How do we best protect yet serve? There is conflicting advice about vaccination of the ferret because of limited clinical experience, and ethically because the vaccines used are labeled for other species only. The vaccines have not been tested and approved for use in the ferret.

The National Veterinary Services Laboratory advises that all canine distemper vaccines on the market are "ferret avirulent," but 1% - 2% mortality in ferrets results from vaccine induced disease. In the case of rabies vaccination, veterinarians can be held liable for human cases resulting from bites of vaccinated ferrets, as well as other wild animals for that matter. The authors properly caution against the vaccination of ferrets against rabies.

Sincerely,
Loren A. Will, DVM
Extension Veterinarian