

# Vets' secret trade in dog body parts

## A clinic that makes money out of putting down healthy animals

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A CLINIC is killing healthy dogs and secretly selling their body parts to Britain's most prestigious veterinary college for research, an investigation has found.

The Royal Veterinary College (RVC) has a financial agreement with a vet's practice which provides the organs from dogs on a regular basis.

An undercover reporter posing as an owner found that staff at the Greyhound Clinic in Essex agreed to kill greyhounds for £30 each even though he told them the dogs had "nothing wrong with them".

The clinic is then paid by the college, which specifically insists the dogs must be healthy before being euthanased, for each animal from which it supplies parts.

The RVC, which is the oldest and largest veterinary college in Britain, admitted that it had a number of similar financial agreements with other clinics to provide specimens.

The practice has "horrified" the RSPCA and animal welfare campaigners and even one of the heads of the greyhound racing industry itself.

The sport has been criticised for failing to explain the fate of thousands of greyhounds which retire from racing each year and then disappear without trace.

Alistair McLean, chief executive of the National Greyhound Racing Club (NGRC), the industry's governing body, said he was "flabbergasted" by the trade in body parts. "This is completely and utterly unacceptable," he said. "It is quite scandalous."

The RSPCA said: "We are shocked by this evidence which appears to show an opening for greyhounds to be systematically destroyed for profit. We certainly would not like to think that there was a financial incentive to ending a pet's life."

Maureen Purvis, of the campaign group Greyhounds UK, compared the practice with that of Burke and Hare, the 19th century bodysnatchers who killed people to provide corpses for dissection. "What this clinic is doing is the canine equivalent of that," she said. "It is just absolute butchery."

Although the rules governing vets allow them to use their discretion on putting down healthy animals, in practice most are reluctant to do so.

The NGRC states that its trainers should put dogs down only as a last resort. "Even a broken leg can often be mended but some trainers see it as simply more cost effective to have it put down," said a racing insider.

It is now apparent, however, that some veterinary practices also have a financial incentive to put dogs down without any medical reason.

The Greyhound Clinic is in an Essex hamlet which is in effect a “greyhound village”. The clinic’s immediate neighbours are the kennels of at least six NGRC-registered trainers, two greyhound retirement homes and a practice racetrack.

The undercover reporter called the clinic and spoke to Donna Atkins, the practice manager, saying he had two greyhounds he wanted putting down because he “had no room for them”.

The reporter asked if the clinic ever took blood from the dogs before killing them and Atkins said the Royal Veterinary College sent people once or twice a week to collect blood from dogs being put down, she said.

When the reporter called back, Atkins said: “We are going to take the glands as well. Is that okay?”

The reporter said it was, but emphasised that his dogs were not old and there was nothing wrong with them. “That’s fair enough; that’s not a problem,” said Atkins. “So it’s 10.15 tomorrow. Bye.”

When the reporter arrived the next day, two students from the RVC, who introduced themselves as Demi and Rick, were waiting. The reporter, who said his dogs would arrive shortly with his brother, explained there was “nothing wrong with them” but the students appeared uninterested. Asked why they wanted the dogs’s lymph glands, Demi said: “We take tissue from healthy dogs and we look at the cells and put them in an artificial environment and use that to further our research.”

The reporter left but not before paying Atkins £60 in advance to have the fictitious dogs put down. He was not asked to sign any forms and was at no time asked his name, phone number, address or any details as to why the dogs should be destroyed.

He also asked Atkins if the RVC was paying the clinic to take body parts. “No, no, we work in conjunction with them. We all work together from all over the place. It’s part of their learning,” she said.

John O’Connor, 65, head vet and director of the clinic, told the undercover reporter, who was now posing as an employee of a company wanting to procure canine organs, that he had an “exclusive” commercial contract with the RVC until November. After that he would review the situation and expected “at least £30 per canine part”.

When contacted later by The Sunday Times O’Connor initially denied a financial agreement with the RVC but subsequently admitted invoicing the college at £10 per dog and being paid.

He claimed that he had been paid a few hundred pounds since he began supplying the parts three years ago and that he intended to pay the money to charity.

O’Connor said he put down dogs only if they had medical problems or showed aggression and said he would not have euthanased the fictitious dogs.

An RVC spokesman confirmed it had an agreement with the clinic but said owners should be issued with a form “to indicate their acknowledgment” of their pets’ fate. “The decision to euthanase an animal must only be taken when both owner and vet agree and the owner has given written consent.”

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