

Harsh Drug Law Leaves Vets in a Bind

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Alexander Shpak faces 8 1/2 years in jail for selling ketamine to an agent.

After eight years of fighting a strict law that virtually bans an anesthetic essential for their work, Russia's veterinarians say they have nearly reached the end of their tether.

Ketamine has long been used for operating on animals throughout the world, but when it came in vogue as a party drug in the late 1990s, Russia's response was to ban the substance entirely in 2003. Outcry among vets ensued, and it was reinstated for veterinary use in 2004, but under such strict conditions that it is almost impossible to obtain.

"It was technically legalized but in reality rejected. In the last eight years, only 5 percent of vets have obtained licenses to be able to use it," says Irina Novozhilova, president of VITA, an animal rights group. "I thought that when it all started, it would be sorted out very fast because you can't just ban a profession. To work without anesthesia is to cut animals when they are conscious."

Oleg Aristov, who runs a veterinary clinic in St. Petersburg, said the alternatives are

heartbreaking.

"It is really painful for your pets to undergo operations [without ketamine]," Aristov said. "It hurts them."

This has left vets between a rock and a hard place, with two contradictory laws condemning them whichever way they turn.

"If a vet uses ketamine, that is a violation of Article 228 for the distribution of narcotics, whereas if they operate on conscious animals, it is a violation of Article 245 for cruelty to animals. So a vet is faced with the choice of which law to break," Novozhilova said.

In a worse case scenario, under the current laws, vets face a possible sentence of up to 20 years in prison just for doing their work. But they are left with few options.

"The best medicines are believed to be opiates, but they are completely banned in Russia, so ketamine is our only choice," Novozhilova added. "Measures other than ketamine absolutely do not give the desired effect."

Despite the law, vets have continued to use ketamine without a license for the past eight years, but the situation was thrown into turmoil once again in March, when Alexander Shpak of St. Petersburg was sentenced to 8 1/2 years in a penal colony.

He was caught selling ketamine by an undercover agent from the Federal Drug Control Service, who befriended him by pretending to be a vet. The agent eventually persuaded Shpak to sell him the drug, claiming it was needed for an urgent operation.

But Yevgeny Chernousov from the Moscow College of Lawyers insists that the Drug Control Service acted illegally in doing this.

"It was provocation. Members of the Drug Control Service, themselves broke the law about operational investigative activity, which bans encouraging people to commit a crime," he said last week. "Moreover, the vet sold ketamine to help an animal, not a drug user."

Aristov says that if such sentences begin to be given out regularly, the profession could be put in real danger.

"We all use ketamine, and I shall continue to do so because there is no other option," he said. "Imagine what would happen if the punishment given to Shpak were given to everyone. I think a lot of my colleagues would be scared to use ketamine and will do operations on conscious animals.

"[The options are] either to leave the profession, constantly expect that you may go to jail for 8 1/2 years — or even for 20 — or not use anything," he said.

Veterinarians also insist that the strict laws are needless because ketamine is now not even in common use as a recreational drug in Russia, a trend that narcotics experts confirm.

"Ketamine is not a narcotic, it is an anesthetic," said Dr. Yevgeny Bryun, a Public Chamber member and director of the Moscow Narcotics research center. "There has been no particular

problem with ketamine use for a long time."

Ivan Varentsov, a policy expert at the UN-funded Andrei Rylkov Foundation for Health and Social Justice, believes that the measures taken toward vets are due to a reluctance to combat the mafia.

"In my opinion the Drug Control Service should have stopped harassing and provoking doctors who want to treat animals a long time ago," he said. "I would like to hear more news about successes with the fight with the real drugs mafia, opening criminal cases against big drug dealers. ... But clearly it is easier and more peaceful to undertake long-term operations to harass doctors."

Dr. Chris Seymour, a Senior Anesthetist at the Royal Veterinary College in Britain, said ketamine's addictive potential is so low that vets there do not even have to record when they have used it.

"Apparently the reason in [Britain] why it is not a controlled drug like morphine and methadone is because it has a fairly low addictive potential," he said. "I think about 15 percent of people who take it would ever take it again because the experience is so unpleasant."

Drug Control Service authorities did not immediately respond to a written request for comment on Monday.

Novozhilova says Russian vets are left without hope, as they cannot think of a way to change the situation.

"We honestly don't know what to do next because we have been battling for eight years, we have had 20 or so protests, a motor rally, 12 news conferences, the signatures of thousands of people," she said. "Dozens of famous people support us, including people's artists; we wrote a letter to [President-elect Vladimir] Putin but did not receive an answer."

One of the people's artists supporting them is actor Dmitry Pevtsov, who called the current laws "organized sadism" and wondered what would happen if Putin's dog, Koni, needed an operation.

"I find it interesting, if he needs to sort out an operation, how will Vladimir Vladimirovich slip out of this one?" he asked. "Surely, Koni won't be operated on without anesthetic?"

Aristov believes that the only way to solve the situation would be for all vets to go on strike, but he does not think this would take place.

"Sadly, I don't think it would happen," he said. "Everyone is too apathetic. It could maybe happen for one week in St. Petersburg."

Novozhilova said the methods that some Russian vets now use to anesthetize animals are the ones that vets commonly used in the 18th century.

"We are becoming dinosaurs in our attitude to animals!" she exclaimed.

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