

COMMISSIONED PAPER

Pet Euthanasia - helping clients through it

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INTRODUCTION

For many of us in practice Euthanasia is a daily occurrence and a necessary part of our everyday work. For the owner this procedure which we regard as routine may be the end of a relationship spanning many years with many shared experiences and the loss of a treasured companion or an only friend.

Every euthanasia is unique. In order to support our clients through their bereavement we must show empathy and a positive regard for their values and feelings.

It can be helpful to first gain an impression of the type and strength of the bond between client and pet in order to prepare for the type of grief they may experience and plan the extent of the support they may need. However, we must not be too quick to pre-judge and should always be open to a changing situation, led by the client.

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- Keeping the pet alive is causing anguish to the owner, and causing a stressful environment
- The owner is unable to afford treatment or special care

Understanding the owner's reasons

Bereavement support begins with the initial phone call to the receptionist who should be sensitive and practical, ensuring that clinical staff are prepared for a potential euthanasia. Most cases involve pets in advanced old age where clients have been anticipating, and often hoping for, a natural and peaceful end but have come to realise the time is right to intervene.

Some of the most common reasons presented by owners for their pet's euthanasia include:

- Advanced old age
- Chronic, incurable disease
- Behavioural problems linked to senility
- Inability to exercise/feed
- Loss of toilet training/incontinence
- Pet not fit enough to cope with house move/emigration
- Animal shows severe aggression which cannot be controlled

Often the decision to euthanase is taken because the owner is unable to continue caring for their pet for one of the following reasons:

- The owners themselves are old or disabled and unable to care for their pet

In all these cases owners will be able to make balanced judgements and will usually know when the right time for euthanasia has come. The most important thing for a supporter to do at this stage is reassure them that their reasons are understandable and valid.

Euthanasia may be appropriate if the current situation is causing extreme anguish as pets tend to be sensitive to their owner's state of mind. Permanent upset for the owner can also cause constant stress for the pet.

Preparing clients

The responsibility of the veterinary profession when facing the euthanasia of a pet is to balance the welfare of the animal and the needs of the owner.

Although the responsibility of the decision ultimately rests with the owner, the vet's opinion obviously has great influence.

In order to make the decision of prolonging life or opting for euthanasia the owner will be helped by considering the following:

- The animal's character and its will to live.
- Physically, is the pet able to:
 - Move around unaided?
 - Go outside to exercise and urinate/defecate?

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Gill Gadd with Chloe

- Rest peacefully without anxiety, distress or pain?

Also:

- Are bad days increasing and outnumbering the good ones and is the animal suffering physically or mentally?
- Does the animal feel pain which cannot be satisfactorily alleviated?

The owner also needs to consider their own ability to cope with their animal however well intentioned they may be.

- Can they cope physically with the demands of nursing care?
- Is the financial cost of the care going to be, or become, a problem?
- Are they able to cope emotionally with the pet's demise whilst they are undertaking the responsibility of its care, and do they have the support of relatives, friends and practice staff?

Clients need careful handling and support at this time and an interview in which they are encouraged to make plans and prepare for dealing with the euthanasia can be very helpful in the long term.

As a supporter we need to establish a history of the case and the basis for the decision to euthanase. We can then offer advice and information on the practical care needed, the animal's quality of life and the option of euthanasia and what it may mean to the client.

The client's emotional needs

Owners and their pets are reassured when the staff involved are familiar. Maintaining a continuity of care will be beneficial when helping them to come to terms with the diagnosis, preparing for the death and during the final moments, as well as during stages of aftercare and support.

One to one support using basic counselling skills can be performed effectively by nursing and ancillary staff who are often without the same time constraints as veterinary surgeons. Some members of staff will be better suited to a counselling role. We can all however acquire and improve on the necessary skills, not only of imparting information but also facilitating its understanding and supporting the recipient while they accept

and act on it.

The bereaved client needs:

- Clear, succinct information and the freedom to make their own choices/decisions
- Respect and empathy showing a true recognition of their grief
- Time to say goodbye and time to work through the transitional stages of grief

Each practice could well design a model to furnish those needs through training, communication and the allocation of time for bereavement situations.

The pre-euthanasia discussion

The pre-euthanasia discussion allows the client to take in relevant information whilst in a relatively unemotional state. After the event they can become overwhelmed by grief and have a feeling of unreality, making it impossible to process details or make important decisions.

In order to further help a client to decide on the best course of action for their sick or injured pet, the following may be discussed:

- Possible treatments/surgical options listing clear and real chances of recovery/prolonging life/improving quality of life. (It is very difficult to give an estimate of life expectancy and this should not be attempted).
- Information about the process of euthanasia, what it will mean for the pet and, more importantly, what it will mean to the client - how their life will be affected and how stages of grief may mean coping with strong emotions.
- Information on how other cases have worked out - what you have seen in practice and a fair and truthful assessment of the prognosis.

Ultimately, it is the client who decides, for whatever reason, the fate of their own animal. In most cases clients do have their pet's best interests at heart and, even if euthanasia must be brought forward because of the owner's inability to cope, that animal will at least benefit from continuity at the end and will not suffer distress.

We have at our disposal the means to deliver this "gentle death" and need only the skill to help the clients through this difficult and emotional time. They are better supported by a positive attitude to their decision and it is up to us to understand their reasons and not pre-judge or condemn them.

It should always be made clear to the client exactly what is going to happen during the process of euthanasia. This allows the client to remain in control of the situation so that they do not feel that the vet has "taken over" or is likely to do something unexpected. Feeling in control can lessen anxiety and help the client to accept the responsibility and the consequences of the final decision they have made on their pet's behalf.

It is also useful to include a warning of possible problems, such as failure to locate a viable vein, so that the owner does not assume that the vet has been incompetent or that a situation

such as this, should it arise, is unforeseen.

The client should also be prepared for disturbing reflexes which they may witness as these can lead to anxieties and misunderstandings. Having some idea of the process and possible problems can help ensure that any "surprises" are avoided. Discussing options for the disposal of the pet's body before euthanasia is advisable as the owner is more likely to be able to state their preference with some objectivity. If they have not already decided on the option, it is much easier to discuss this before the event whilst the owner can still think clearly.

Organising a practice protocol

The most important factors for managing euthanasia in the surgery from a client's point of view are a caring and helpful approach and making time for them, their animals and the procedure. It is important too, that everything behind the scenes such as printing consent forms and the booking of appointments goes smoothly. This shows the practice in a good professional light and ensures that the veterinary team's attention is not distracted from the empathy and care they show the client.

Pre-euthanasia clinics should be scheduled with owners to help the final procedure to run more smoothly. A pre-euthanasia talk with a VN can summarise the procedure and alert the client to available options regarding disposal of the body.

For these clinics to have a chance of succeeding they must be recommended to owners by the vets whilst in consult with geriatric or terminally ill patients.

Another source of information can be provided in the form of a practice leaflet, outlining the euthanasia procedure and the available options.

Privacy and comfort will ease the stress of the situation and it is worthwhile considering setting aside a room within the practice designed to create a more natural, homely setting. Remove the computer to ensure total focus on the individual. Avoid having an examination table, which will serve to form a barrier; instead arrange same level seating. To further create an atmosphere of calm for animal and owners, the following features may be included:

- Upholstered chairs (with removable covers) to provide more comfortable seating
- A low wooden coffee table on which deceased pets can be laid
- A standard lamp for ambient lighting (strip lighting still functional when needed)
- A sideboard/cupboard to house the range of caskets available for ashes
- A book of condolence which helps owners to feel their grief is "normal"
- Framed pictures should replace posters and flowers/plants help make the atmosphere less clinical
- A large floor rug which can be lifted for cleaning
- Leaflets, books and cards from clients

If your practice does not have the extra space for this luxury, consider using the consulting room in the quietest location, or schedule your euthanasia appointments outside busy consulting

times. Clients can be spared the upsetting trauma of being seated with others in the waiting room if they are conducted straight through to the consulting or farewell room on arrival. It is also helpful to allow them to leave through a back door or staff exit.

Longer appointments can be made with a nurse involved around the vet's consultation slot to offer clients more time and privacy before and after the euthanasia. This eases time considerations for the vet, provides extra care for the client and enhances job satisfaction for the nurse.

With an animal of ill-temperament or one that is in a great deal of pain and may resent appropriate restraint, it may be advisable to give a sedative such as Medetomidine Hydrochloride (Domitor® - Pfizer) prior to the final injection to ease the procedure. Alternatively, Acepromazine in an oral form can be dispensed for administration one hour before arrival at the surgery. Results can however, be unreliable with excitable animals showing little response.

In non-aggressive animals, the placement of an IV catheter prior to the euthanasia allows the owner to hold and cuddle their pet whilst the vet can inject unaided. Although this involves taking the pet away from the owner for a short time on arrival, clients rarely object and it can ease the whole procedure, making the final moments less stressful for all involved.

Finally, allow the owners time to say goodbye to their pet and offer to briefly leave the room. Don't be afraid to encourage them to talk about the life of their animal, and be prepared to

The farewell room should be designed to create a more natural, homely setting





A sideboard/cupboard to house the range of caskets available for ashes

listen to stories of the relationship, as this shows empathy and understanding and is always much appreciated.

Many well-written leaflets are available from The Blue Cross and other charities to help owners work through and understand the grieving process and it can help to have these to hand as the client leaves. The Pet Bereavement Support Service runs a telephone helpline staffed by volunteers and this service can be of great help.

Handwritten cards of condolence may be sent but always make sure they go under separate cover from any invoice that is due. A follow up telephone call shows the client that their links with the practice have a genuine value. Your empathy with and concern for them at this time will be truly appreciated and remembered. Try to offer this continuing support by mentioning at the euthanasia consultation that you or members of your bereavement support staff are willing to make or receive calls if it is felt that the client would appreciate this. Consider also using e-mail as another point of contact for grieving clients.

Many people do not realise how deeply the bereavement will affect them and the influence it may have on aspects of their everyday lives, and often have no one to turn to when the loss becomes tangible. Our continued concern may not directly bring in revenue but has a positive long term effect in engendering goodwill by word of mouth. Clients are more likely to become permanently bonded to the practice.

External Sources of Support

Staff should be aware of their limitations and referral to trained counsellors or medical professionals may be necessary in some cases. Suggesting to a deeply distressed owner that it is possible for them to speak with their doctor or with the Samaritans will show you understand their emotions and raise issues that they

themselves may have been too embarrassed to put forward. A handout listing useful telephone numbers and advice on outside support available can be immensely helpful.

There is a wealth of literature available from organisations and charities to help clients come to terms with their grief and the overpowering emotions they may be encountering.

The Blue Cross (www.bluecross.org.uk) run their own telephone help-line for bereaved pet owners, staffed by trained volunteers.

EASE, The Environmental Animal Sanctuary and Education services and also run a Pet Bereavement Support Service are on-line at www.ease-animals.org.uk

CRUSE Bereavement Care (www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk) is a voluntarily run organisation and will help in cases of complicated loss where grief involves previous bereavements.

The key to a successful euthanasia is forward planning. If we can get the client to think about when, why and where, with an idea of their option for body disposal when they know the time is approaching, then all can be made ready and someone can be on hand to be with them with support throughout. All this planning can include the last thing anyone wants to think about, the payment. Pre-payment can be arranged or it can be agreed that an invoice be sent after the event. Either way, all concerned know what to expect without having to talk it through at length on the day.

Each case we see is different; how many clients, who could really benefit from this close, personal service, are slipping through the net; not having the chance to spend time with the support of a nurse, hurried through an ordinary consultation and sent home with an empty blanket wondering if there is someone they could talk to?

Veterinary practices should be aiming to achieve a working protocol to care for as many clients, in the way that is right for them, as possible.

Useful contacts and further reading

Companion Animal Death Mary Stewart (Butterworth Heinemann)

The Human-Animal Bond and Grief Lagoni Butler Hetts (Saunders)

Counselling Skills for Health Professionals Philip Burnard (Nelson Thornes)

Details of the study course *Offering Support in Pet Bereavement* can be obtained from The Blue Cross, Shilton Road, Burford, Oxon. OX18 4PF or online at www.bluecross.org.uk

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