

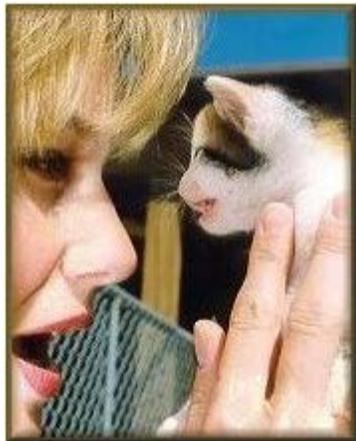
Euthanasia... What to Expect

by Dr. T. J. Dunn, Jr.

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As a veterinarian, I have noted with interest that during a single human lifetime a number of pet lifetimes may pass, and as we recall each pet that shared our time, it seems that they never stayed with us quite long enough.

You pick up that new kitten or puppy for the very first time. Involuntarily and with no unconscious effort, the bond takes root. Despite the thrill of acquiring a new pet, though, your imagination races years ahead and uncomfortable, fleeting thoughts pass through your mind. "I hope this little rascal lives a long time" is a typical thought. Or you can't help hearing that inner voice whisper "I can't imagine this cute little puppy as an old dog" or "Someday this little furry kitten will be old and unhealthy". We always fear losing these pets that mean so much to us. Nevertheless, that time inevitably does come. And we pet owners simply have to face our pet's mortality. I have often thought how wonderful it would have been if my Golden Retrievers and wonderful feline friends would have had life spans of sixty or seventy years!



Every individual pet owner faces that final day with a beloved pet slightly differently from every other pet owner. I have seen totally objective (and even outright callous) pet owners simply drop off their pet for euthanasia with no more respect or empathy than a robot. I have never been able to understand this type of pet owner who seems to be saying "When you're dead, you're dead". They can still comfort or simply be with their pet at the time of euthanasia; but for their own reasons they choose to separate themselves from the final moments of their pet's life. Maybe we humans are so close to our pets that we somehow project our own humanity and mortality into them and we actually see ourselves at our own last moments. Do some pet owners act out how they think they would view their own passing?

On the other hand I have witnessed seemingly strong, objective individuals that seem to be somewhat cold and distant who completely fall apart at the time of their pet's passing. The theme

to keep in mind, then, as you contemplate how YOU will act at your pet's final moments is to remember that it is a completely *personal* experience. You have to decide what is best for you and your pet. I have had people actually say to me "I am sorry, Doctor, but I don't know how to act right now". My usual response is "Act like you. Your pet has been a huge part of your life for a long time and this is not an easy thing for you to do."

Most people really have had no guidelines to follow, had no firm ground on which to stand while partaking in their pet's final time. For those of you who have had no experience with euthanasia of a pet, I would like to offer a few guidelines so that you will have some firmer ground to stand on when "that time" does come.

Making the appointment

Be sure to tell the receptionist that you would like to schedule the appointment at a time when the veterinarian is not in a hurry with other appointments or surgery. You might even request that your appointment be the last one of the day or the first one in the morning. Explain that you have never had to go through this experience before and would like to know what to expect regarding the

euthanasia procedure. You have a right to take your deceased pet home for personal burial. You may also choose to leave your deceased pet with the veterinarian for burial or cremation. Always ask what will be done with your deceased pet after it is "put to sleep"! If you don't, you will always wonder, and your imagination will not be kind to you.

Let me dispel an ugly myth. I can't tell you how many concerned pet owners have innocently asked me "You aren't going to experiment on her, are you?" or "You aren't going to sell him to some lab are you?"

I have never known of any veterinarian anywhere who sells deceased pets. There are no labs that would even consider taking a deceased animal. And as for experimentation, what kind of an "experiment" can a veterinarian do in his practice on a deceased pet that would

have any impact whatsoever on veterinary science? It is a totally different matter for your veterinarian to ask you respectfully if you would want an autopsy performed for a specific reason. Veterinarians *do not* sell deceased pets and veterinarians *do not* do experiments on deceased pets. So you can rest assured on these matters. But you certainly have a right to know what will be done with your dog or cat if you choose to leave it with the veterinarian. Do not be apologetic about asking.



IN HOME EUTHANASIA

All pet owners want their pet's last moments to be as comfortable as possible and as stress free for themselves and their pet as the situation can be. The natural question is "Can the veterinarian come to our home to administer the euthanasia solution?" The answer is Yes. However, there are a number of things for you to consider.

First: What will you do with your pet after euthanasia?

Second: Will your pet require restraint so that the needle can be carefully placed into a vein? In the animal hospital, the staff is trained in gentle restraint procedures which allows for proper administration of the euthanasia solution.

Third: The veterinarian will most likely have to schedule the home visit after regular office hours. Are you willing to pay for an after-hours in-home visit?

Fourth: Do you understand that often, as the pet is euthanized, there will be an emptying of the bowels and bladder? In an animal hospital setting this is not a problem.

Fifth: Understand that in the animal hospital most animals are willing to accept that they are not in their own territory and they become less defensive than they would be in their own home. This realization by the pet actually allows for easier handling of the pet in the hospital than the same handling as taking place in the pet's home.

Sixth: Are you willing to have your pet sedated prior to attempts to place the needle for euthanasia? Sometimes the process goes much more smoothly if sedation is given prior to the visit. Sedation is a good topic to discuss with your veterinarian to lessen any stress on your pet prior to an in-hospital or in-home procedure.

There are veterinarians who have made it a policy never to euthanize a pet outside of the animal hospital setting. They have some very good reasons for this policy. However, if you must have your pet euthanized at home, don't be reluctant to make some phone calls and you will be able to find a veterinarian who will accommodate your wishes.

The Appointment... To Be There or Not To Be There

It is your personal choice whether or not to be present in the exam or surgery room when the veterinarian administers the euthanasia solution. Many people simply cannot bear to see the moment of their special friend's passing. Others wouldn't let a tidal wave interfere with their being present! It really is up to your personal preference. Some people choose to stay in the waiting room during the procedure and then briefly view their pet after it has passed away, maybe then spending a few moments in private with their pet.

If you are not sure just what to do I will offer an observation I have made from feedback from my clients. There are a multitude of pet owners who have regretted NOT being there with their pet when the pet was being euthanized, and their feelings that they may have abandoned their pet at a crucial time has created a certain sense of guilt that simply will not go away. So... think over very carefully how you will feel long after your pet has been "put to sleep". Will you have regrets if you do not stay with your pet?

No one is comfortable with death, especially your veterinarian and animal hospital staff who face death every day. Your discomfort with the event should not govern your decision whether or not to be present with your pet at the time of its passing. Many apprehensive clients, with a slightly surprised look, have queried after the event "Is that it? That was very quick and peaceful. Thank you, Doctor".

Let me be very clear about something... it is perfectly normal and acceptable to cry. I have often wondered why some people don't cry. This can be a very sad time and even though the animal hospital staff might have to go through this all too often, there really is no getting used to euthanizing a dog or cat. The animal hospital staff has often formed a strong connection with many of the pets in their care and often join in the crying; so you really have no need to pretend that you can handle it when inside you feel terrible.

You might choose to leave your pet in the car and go in first to see if there will be any delays prior to your scheduled time. As a veterinarian I have never been comfortable seeing a client sitting patiently in the waiting room with their pet for that final appointment. It is perfectly reasonable to ask the receptionist to let you know when the doctor is ready to see your pet... then bring your pet directly into the exam room. You should not have to be isolated in the exam room for a long period of time, either.

If you think your pet would be more comfortable and less apprehensive (not all pets relish coming to the animal hospital!) you may ask the veterinarian to provide your pet with some sedation prior to your visit. This can be administered at home at a directed time interval prior to the appointment or often sedation is given in the animal hospital via a painless injection under the pet's skin. After a short time the pet is relaxed and calm.



In order to administer the euthanasia solution* your veterinarian must gain entry into a vein. The solution is specially made to act quickly and painlessly but it must be administered intravenously. This requires that your pet be calm and confident. If the veterinarian requests your permission to sedate your pet, please understand that the request is made in order to humanely and peacefully accomplish the task at hand. If your pet is uncooperative, defensive, afraid or even fractious, your veterinarian and you will not be able to properly carry out the procedure.

** Most euthanasia solutions are a combination of chemicals whose intent is to effect a quick and painless termination of nerve transmission and to effect complete muscle relaxation. When nerve impulses are not conducted there is no thought, no sensation, no movement. The solution is available only to licensed veterinarians and your veterinarian must possess a special certificate in order to purchase the solution.*

The Last Moments

When the veterinarian is ready to administer the euthanasia solution the assistant will help hold your pet and put a slight amount of pressure on a vein, usually in the foreleg. This allows the veterinarian to see the vein better and aids in passing a fine needle into the vein. When it is certain that the needle is within the vein the veterinarian slowly injects the solution. Many pet owners choose to help hold their pet and if possible even have the pet in their arms at the time of euthanasia. Your veterinarian will try to accommodate your wishes, but remember that it is imperative that the solution be injected within the vein for the procedure to unfold properly.

Usually within six to twelve seconds after the solution is injected the pet will take a slightly deeper breath, then grow weak and finally lapse into what looks like a deep sleep. (This state gives rise to the questionable euphemism "to put to sleep".) The pet, although completely unconscious, may continue to take a few more breaths before all movement ceases. I have found that the older and sicker the pet the longer this unconscious breathing state goes on.

Some pet owners will be more comfortable if they do not observe the pet's final moments and would rather be in the waiting room during the injection. Then when their pet has passed away, the owner may wish to be with their pet privately for a few moments. If you do choose to visit with your pet after it has been euthanized, ask your veterinarian to be sure your pet's eyelids are closed; some pet owners have been saddened even further by looking into their deceased pet's eyes.



It is at this point when the veterinarian has completed the procedure where great empathy and support for the pet owner is very important. I generally ask the owner if they would like to spend a few moments alone with the pet. Some people do and some people do not. If the client chooses to take the pet home, by pre-arrangement a container is at the ready to receive the pet.

The veterinarian usually will place the pet into the container and carry the deceased pet out to the car for the owner. If the pet owner chooses to have the pet cremated the veterinarian generally will make the arrangements through a cremation service and notify you when you can expect to have the ashes returned. Generally, pet owners are surprised at the small quantity of ashes that are returned. Remember, most living creatures are about 95% water.

It is perfectly reasonable to ask "How do I know that the ashes that I receive will actually be those of my pet?" Everyone wonders about that. Your veterinarian should be willing to provide you with the name and phone number of the cremation service. Don't be afraid to call up the cremation service and tell them your concerns about your pet. You should get courteous and respectful answers to all your questions and if you don't, let your veterinarian know. In fact it would be a good idea to call the cremation service long before that final day so that the last moments with your pet are as unstressful as possible.

It is not unusual nor unreasonable for pet owners to save a bit of their pet's fur as a physical remembrance of their special friend. Some people want their pet to be buried or cremated with a few photos, or a rose or even a personal letter or poem from the pet owner to their pet. Just remember it is YOUR friend, YOUR pet, that is passing away and you can do anything you wish to ease your transition into the time of separation from that friend.

Suggestion: You may want someone to be with you after the appointment to drive you home. You may be surprised how difficult it can be to concentrate on driving after such an emotional event as what you just experienced.

Grief

Many, many pet owners experience a very strong and lasting sense of pain and grief after the passing of a special pet. Part of their trouble stems from having so few human friends who actually understand the deep sense of grief they are experiencing. Even a close friend might say "Oh, just go get another one" or "Gosh, it was only a cat". This can be a very lonely and private grief since the pet owner often is reluctant to disclose the source of their saddened state for fear of ridicule. Plus it is very common for the pet owner to think they see or hear their deceased pet in the home or out in the yard long after it is gone. If someone hasn't personally experienced



the loss of a loved pet they simply will be unable to connect with the pet owner who is grief stricken.

The bereaved pet owner often is self-critical, too. Reading their thoughts we would recognize self chastisement such as "Oh, this is ridiculous feeling like this over a Cocker Spaniel" or "I can't believe loosing a cat would wreck my entire life!" And the loss of a pet often brings up memories of other losses in a person's life and a vicious cycle of sadness, helplessness and even clinical depression can result. Our pets are THAT important to us and we don't have to apologize for feeling that way!

Those pet owners who feel they need to talk to someone who understands their sadness have hope! There are a number of grief support groups and counselors who specialize in pet loss counseling. Never feel ashamed or belittle yourself for having strong feelings of loss and sadness over a deceased pet. You are NOT alone in your sadness. There are numerous web sites that may prove helpful and informative while you progress along the road to accepting the loss of your pet. Never feel ashamed for being lost and lonely after losing your little friend. And remember, it always takes longer than you would expect to start functioning "normally" again. As well, your state's Veterinary Medical Association (ask your veterinarian for the phone number) will direct you to a nearby pet loss specialist.

If you still can't find one, contact me and I will find one for you.

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