

The Art of Euthanasia

Mary Gardner, DVM
Lap of Love Veterinary Hospice - Nationwide

Learning Objectives:

The euthanasia appointment is one of the most emotionally challenging appointments for the entire staff (and owner). This lecture will go over all aspects of the appointment including how to handle the initial phone call, discussing the processing, handling payment, technical aspects of euthanasia and body care.

Being Good at Death:

We are not taught to be good at death. No one taught me how to walk into an exam room for a euthanasia, what to say to a crying teenager, or whether or not to hug the old man that just lost the last piece of his late wife. I received no direct guidance about the proper verbal and non-verbal techniques that make this “most difficult appointment” just a bit easier on everyone, including myself. And from our numerous discussions with new grads, it’s a common theme; about 75% of veterinarians graduate without ever administering the life-ending medication. It’s no wonder why our lectures are packed at conferences and why our hospice practice has more requests for externs than we can handle. We simply weren’t taught the intricacies of death, and as the only medical profession licensed to euthanize, we have an incredible privilege and responsibility to handle this procedure properly.

Euthanasia:

If there is one thing to think about when approaching the euthanasia appointment, it’s “What would I do for my own family’s pet?” This involves not only you, but your immediate non-veterinary family as well. What could you do to help the ones you love through the process? Now make sure that is the minimum standard of service and care you give each of your patients and their caregivers! Here are some tips to put this into practice: The entire euthanasia process can be broken down into 4 stages:

1) Setting up the Euthanasia Appointment

- a. **Be the first to say the “E” word.** Clients hate to be the first ones to bring up “euthanasia.” They think you will judge them for not caring about their pet or that you will be mad at them for giving up too early. Be the first to say it. And even if they’re upset at you for the suggestion, at 2:00 am when they’re stressed because their dog is pacing all night or their spouse is yelling at them because their elderly cat has peed outside the litter box for the third time that day, they will know that you gave them permission to think about the next step.
- b. **Making the appointment:** How your support team handles this initial contact with the client is crucial. It took the owner a lot of nerve and emotion to call; many feel that they are making the appointment to kill their best friend. Guilt, worry, anxiety, sorrow are just a few of the ingredients in their emotional cocktail. The receptionist should have nothing else on their mind but assisting that client. They should not be put on hold, the receptionist should not be checking out another client at the same time, and if at all possible, background noise should be kept to a minimum. Most importantly, empathy must be conveyed; *I’m so sorry you’re facing this*. Do not be scared to show them some emotion, they want to know that you care.

2) During the Appointment

- a. **The Arrival:** When the time for the appointment comes, everyone in the clinic should be prepared. The paperwork should be ready, dated, and IN the room. The room itself should be set up properly and one person should be prepared to assist the client. Meet the family at their car prepared to help them into the clinic. Even holding the door open while the owner manages the cat carrier is a huge help to the client. And of course, shuttle them to the room immediately. Paperwork is best completed at this time before reality sets in with the family. Again, emotions will only get deeper from here, not lighter!

- b. **The Space.** The room itself is very important. Regardless if it's a separate comfort room or a regular exam room, you must do your best to make it as warm and comfortable as possible (it should not be the 'cold sterile' environment owner's dread).
- c. The veterinarian should go into the room and preferably not leave again until the pet has passed unless the owner requests time alone. Go in with sedation and euthanasia already pulled up in syringes in your pocket, or given to your technician. Speak to the client and make a visual assessment of the pet. Do not pass judgement or appear to be uncomfortable with the decision unless you are certain you will not euthanize. Your discomfort will leave a family with guilt for years.
- d. When explaining the euthanasia process, it is important to give the owner peace of mind that it is a gentle process. Explain that euthanasia means "good death" and that the medication is an overdose of anesthesia, in which they go to sleep and don't wake back up
- e. Offer them some time alone with their pet. If they want time alone, hand them the 'ringer' portion of a wireless doorbell. Have the 'bell' portion in the treatment room or give it to the technician assigned to the case. That way the owner does not have to leave the pet to find someone when they're ready. The human animal bond should never be broken. Generally, people do request a few minutes alone, but it's usually a very short amount of time.
- f. **The Procedure:** Intra-muscular or subcutaneous sedation is crucial for the client's experience and we are always discouraged to learn how many do not sedate pets before euthanasia, or provide only IV sedation (in which their pet rapidly goes from consciousness to unconsciousness, appearing dead). Having 5 minutes for the pet to slowly relax gives the owner time to watch their pet get comfortable. Many times, I hear, "I haven't seen him this calm and relaxed in months!" We call this "secondary sedation of the owner."
- g. When it comes time for the final medication, ask the owner "Max is ready, are you?" Never proceed without them fully knowing what is about to happen. They should also know that their pet will pass in 30-60 seconds. All too often owners do not realize it occurs as fast as it does. Whether you use an indwelling catheter, butterfly catheter, or straight needle, do your best to stay out of the way of the owner. Let them hold their pet and instruct them to "keep talking to her, she can hear you." Giving them something to do keeps their focus off you and this surreal moment for them.
- h. After administration, listen for the heart and remain silent unless the owner speaks. This is an important moment and must be honored.
- i. Stay present in the room for a few minutes as you gather the syringe and supplies. Watch for agonal breath(s), twitching, or any other movements, which generally happens within 1-5 minutes post mortem. Since we do not recommend warning about all these side-effects before, this is the time to explain them if/when they occur.

3) Memorial Items

- a. The paw print is the most traditional and cherished memorial item, even more than cremains sometimes! Every pet owner should be given one at the time of the appointment and given to the owner to take home that day (at no charge!). With air dry clay like Crayola Model Magic, this is inexpensive and takes very little time. Many clinics make the paw print after the clients leave but you are missing a huge opportunity to make the owners feel a little bit of joy at such a devastating moment.

4) Body Care

- a. Never allow the owner to leave their deceased pet alone. If they need time alone after the euthanasia, allow them that time and hand them the wireless doorbell again. This way, a technician can come back into the room as they leave.
- b. Know your crematory well. Understand how they do things and be confident they are providing the level of service your clients deserve.

If there's one thing we can tell you to improve your end of life care for pets and their families, it's to provide the best from the get-go. Provide the kind of care that exceeds the expectations of 95% of the population out there. Do not cater to the 5% of people that are irregular.

The euthanasia appointment should not be the end of the client relationship, it should be the beginning of the next relationship you have with them! And remember, if it were your own pet, what would you do?