

Veterinary Hospice and Palliative Care

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Almost every time the door opens, I am greeted with a crying client. As a veterinarian that limits my practice to in-home hospice and euthanasia, it is something I encounter daily with my families. In those moments, I give a warm smile, a gentle handshake and in many cases, a big hug.

Although the majority of our appointments are for euthanasia, we also offer veterinary hospice care to our concerned pet parents. However, veterinary hospice is still very misunderstood, even within our profession. I am often asked, "What is veterinary hospice?" at clinics and conferences. It is important to first understand what hospice is NOT: It is not prolonging suffering nor is it euthanasia or natural dying. Hospice simply is a medically supervised service dedicated to providing comfort and quality of life for the pet (and the owners) until euthanasia is elected or natural death occurs.

A great deal of families wish to keep their pet alive for as long as possible while also maintaining a good quality of life but simply don't know how and feel helpless. As a veterinary hospice practitioner, I am able and willing to help extend life as long as pain and anxiety are controlled, but this is always preceded by a lengthy discussion on the progression of the disease process present and a clear "stop point" which we agree is the ending of a good quality of life. Communication, preparation, and more communication is the hallmark of a successful hospice case.

At Lap of Love, many of our clients are referred to us from veterinary specialists – mostly oncologists, cardiologists and internists. While much of veterinary hospice is ideally done in the home, where the pet is most comfortable, many discussions and treatments should be started at the clinic with their primary veterinarian who has enjoyed a long term relationship with the pet parent. With that being said, I am sad to report that approximately 40% of our clients have not taken their pet into the clinic within the last 2 years. I strongly believe that we can help a great number of pets if we are able to educate owners on the aging process and also the progression of the specific diseases their pets are facing.

Veterinary medicine focuses a lot on 'Senior Wellness' but I think we are asleep at the wheel when it comes to geriatric pet care. Caring for a geriatric pet is a completely different experience than caring for the 8 yr old 'senior dog'. Care giving for the elder pet can be emotionally and physically exhausting and it is vital to support the owners through this time. Our philosophy of the way we care for these pets, in most cases, needs to shift from curing but to simply caring. This quote from Jurassic Park is a favorite of mine, "Just because we can, doesn't mean we should". Too often owners tell me that they are scared to continue with their regular veterinarian because they are simply forced into xrays or bloodwork. Often hospice is simply a tool to help the owners grasp the idea that their pet's life will be ending soon. It may be a month or even just a day – at this point radiographs are pointless – but pain medication, education, communication and preparation is priceless.

"Doc when is it time?" – Boy do I wish I had a dollar for every time I was asked that! However, this is a good question and deserves a lot of attention and time discussing it with your clients. It is not as simple as saying 'When he stops eating, it's time' or 'He will give you 'the look' and you will know'. Although at times those are good indications of it being time, often, it is not. The 13 year old Labrador with osteoarthritis may still be eating and looking excited when his owner comes home, yet can barely get up, falls down the stairs and is sitting in his own feces half the day. Assessing quality of life is an important part of the hospice appointment. There are many tools available that can assist owners with evaluating quality of life. We have a Quality of Life scale available on our website <http://www.lapoflove.com> under the 'Quality of Life' tab. We also developed a more sophisticated tool where owners can create a profile for their pet, select a specific ailment and are asked questions based on the

ailment. They can also make journal entries, chart weight or body condition score and attaching pictures every day. This is free to the public at <http://www.pethospicejournal.com>

Although providing hospice in the home can garner a lot of information that may be missed at the clinic, the discussion and treatment can start with you. Setting up a hospice program in your clinic is actually very simple.

It is most important to help the family understand the disease process their pet is facing. Although we cannot predict exactly what will happen in the future, we can use our medical training and experience to give each family facing an end-of-life experience with their pet a possible and probable progression of their pet's disease process. As doctors, this is the most important piece of information we have to give them and the most valuable tool families have in the decision making process. We must, to the best of our ability, explain the most likely "natural" method of death if left unattended. This educated approach to the physicality of death is essential to veterinary hospice care; by providing the family with knowledge and expectations, we give them the ability to make an informed decision based on their personal wishes for their pet with the gentle guidance of their veterinarian.

By using the word 'Hospice' with your clients, it redirects their thoughts from curing their pet to caring for their pet and preparing themselves for death and grieving. Then, you can tailor your medical management appropriately to make sure the pet is kept comfortable and safe.

Some hospice services your clinic can offer:

- **Consultations** - This is our most common and requested hospice service. You may be surprised at how appreciative the client is for 30 minutes with a veterinarian discussing what to expect and how to manage their pet's disease and progression.

When a client calls us for a euthanasia but says, "It's not time yet – but I want to be in your system" – to me, this is a call for help. Their pet is bad but not quite ready for euthanasia. This is the perfect opportunity to offer a consultation.

Pain and anxiety management – The amount of pets that I see that are not on any pain medication is staggering. Providing adequate pain medication is vital and evaluating its effectiveness is just as important. I also equip the owner with "emergency intervention" they can do themselves. For example, the client with a dog with Osteosarcoma should leave your clinic with a dose of injectable pain medication and the knowledge of how to administer it in case of a pathologic fracture. That way the pet can have some relief while the next steps are organized.

Many dogs are up all night panting and pacing, with many owners awake as well. Providing medications that help them sleep through the night helps the anxiety level and is appreciated by everyone in the house.

- **In home technician visits and care** – seeing the pets in their own environment is key as they act differently in their surroundings. More importantly, modifications can be made that may have been overlooked and treatments can be done in the home without a distressing trip to your clinic.

The most common ailments we see at Lap of Love are: osteoarthritis, renal disease, heart failure and a variety of cancer. But one that is often overlooked or put into the osteoarthritis category is sarcopenia. Age related muscle atrophy is a huge problem in our geriatric pets. Owners need to be educated on this ailment and taught how to manage it in the home, how to properly exercise their pets and provide supportive care. In most of those patients, pain medications and NSAIDS are of no benefit, leaving the owner frustrated. Having a hospice package and plan for the above ailments is a great way to start offering hospice at your clinic.

HOSPICE HANDOUTS

In the same manner that veterinary clinics provide pet owners with a puppy/kitten package, detailed end-of-life information for patients should also be available. Some things to include are:

- Disease sheets with detailed information about the illness affecting the pet, including end-stage clinical signs
- Daily diaries that describe appetite, thirst, urination, defecation, mobility, and clinical signs of disease, which are important things to monitor while a pet is in hospice care as they help determine overall quality of life.
- “Quality of life” scales help give a measurable value to owners; the pet can be evaluated daily or weekly and ideally by more than one person in the family, which provides a more accurate evaluation of the pet. Make sure to teach the owner(s) how to accurately use the scale.
- Adjunctive services you support and trust (preferably mobile) in the area, such as acupuncture, massage, mobile grooming, in-home pet sitting.
- Local pet loss groups or grief counselors, contact local human hospice for a good referral source.
- In-home hospice and euthanasia services (if clinic does not provide these services), such as in-home evaluation, rechecks, diagnostics, fluid therapy, bandage changes, and prescribing/ administering medication. Try using a pet sitter who is also a certified veterinary technician.
- Emergency clinics in the local area, if your clinic does not offer 24-hour emergency care.
- Specific euthanasia information, including:
 - When and how to schedule euthanasia at your clinic, and if your clinic offers euthanasia in the home.

While offering veterinary hospice may not provide the largest avenue of revenue – the immeasurable benefits are great. The satisfaction your clients will have with the full circle of veterinary care at your clinic will be priceless. This will lead to positive word of mouth, referrals, and repeat business with other pets from that client when necessary and most importantly – it is what is best for the pet.

Veterinary hospice is here to stay. When families have a better end of life experience with their pets, they heal more quickly from the debilitating emotional loss. They are better able to cope with their decisions, feel confident in their ability to care for their pets, and more quickly open their homes and hearts to pet ownership again.