

Understanding Animal Hospice

Presenter: Kathleen Cooney DVM, CHPV, CPEV, DACAW
Companion Animal Euthanasia Training Academy
Lutz, FL USA

What is Animal Hospice?

Hospice is best regarded as a philosophy of care or a framework for decision-making. Hospice focuses on a patient's comfort rather than treatment aimed at a cure when that outcome is no longer expected. The goal in animal hospice is to maintain the animal's well-being and dignity at the end of its life. As a patient's condition requires treatment, preserving quality-of-life takes precedence over extending life. Hospice is not a denial of treatment. Hospice recognizes dying as a normal process, whether resulting from disease, and sees the end of life as an opportunity for growth. Hospice exists in the belief that patients in the last phases of life deserve this care so that they might live as fully and comfortably as possible. Through appropriate care and the promotion of a caring community sensitive to their needs, patients and their families may be free to attain a degree of mental and spiritual preparation for death that is satisfactory to them. The patient's condition may continue to be addressed directly, but heroic measures causing significant distress are to be avoided. The terms "animal hospice" and "veterinary hospice" are interchangeable.

Animal hospice also addresses the needs of the pet's caregiver(s) and other family members. By supporting both the patient and family, the human-animal bond can remain strong throughout the dying process and beyond. It is important to note, however, that when the preferences of the family counter the best interests of the patient, the needs of the patient are of prime importance. The veterinarian's role as a patient advocate is vital even at the end of an animal's life.

Veterinary Care for Patient

- pain relievers
- anti-nausea medications
- antibiotics
- anxiety relief
- acupuncture
- nutrition and hydration support
- palliative surgery or radiation therapy
- euthanasia

Nursing Care for Patient

- turning
- bathing
- medication administration
- assistance with movement, eating, drinking, urination, and defecation

Family Support

- information sharing
- grief counseling
- respite care
- assistance with decision-making and planning

- memorialization
- body care after death

In truth, defining animal hospice and determining how it differs from conventional end-of-life care is still a work in progress. But regardless of its ultimate definition, animal hospice should be seen as an alternative to premature euthanasia and to the prolonged suffering that can result either from isolating an animal in intensive care or from inadequate treatment. Hospice emphasizes the terminally ill animal's quality-of-life, provides the family precious time with the animal, and helps the family cope with the approaching death of their beloved companion.

Suffering

What is suffering? Much has been studied and written about it, but our caregivers are unlikely to have read much on the subject. They are going to make decisions based on what they see and what they know from previous life experiences. Caregivers commonly consider any level of suffering as unacceptable, however some suffering at the end of life is normal. To understand this, we should look at the definition. Suffering, by many dictionary descriptions, refers to the bearing of pain, distress, or hardship. To suffer means to deny oneself pleasure and joy, the opposite of suffering. My preferred definition of suffering, which I heard years ago, but cannot find its source, is to be denied thy true self. In this definition, anything that prevents one living to their full potential and desires would be considered suffering. The big question is whether the suffering of an animal is severe enough that death is warranted. As the physical body declines, realistic expectations deserve discussion. Caregivers will have a better/safer grasp of the future if they understand that appetite will change, mobility will decrease, mental faculties will diminish, etc.

When referring to animals and their end-of-life journey, caregivers are heavily burdened with determining what level of suffering they are experiencing. How much pain is too much? How long can their pet go without eating? Any physical or emotional change could mean suffering and that is scary to them. My service often hears people say, "I don't want him to suffer" or "I don't want any suffering." Zero suffering at the end of life is nearly impossible to achieve, especially if you conform to my preferred definition that anything that denies them their true self is suffering. I use this definition because it tends to lessen the harshness of the word and normalizes its presence in our lives. Suffering is more commonplace. This being said, there may come a time when physical and mental suffering is simply too much to bear; the pain is too great, the air hunger is overwhelming, and so on. If palliative options are exhausted, euthanasia does become the best choice and what most will reach for.

The Current State of Animal Hospice

Hospice is an underutilized tool in veterinary medicine. Until recently, end-of-life care has been limited in its scope. After diagnosis of a life-threatening condition, caregivers typically had to pick between three options: 1) aggressive treatment, 2) euthanasia, or 3) limited palliation followed by euthanasia once quality-of-life is no longer acceptable. Veterinarians may have been reluctant to expand their services into animal hospice care for several reasons, not the least of which is the newness of the field. Many doctors have little experience in advanced end-of-life care and are uncertain how to proceed. Educational opportunities in animal hospice have been few and far between, but this is beginning to change.

Due to its all-encompassing nature, providing hospice services can also appear overwhelming. Human providers have dealt with this obstacle by taking a team approach. An animal hospice team might include:

- veterinarians – traditional and complementary providers
- veterinary technicians
- veterinary assistants
- pharmacists
- social workers
- grief counselors
- pet loss support hotlines
- chaplains/clergy
- workers from the field of human hospice
- pet sitters
- volunteers
- the animal patient's human family members and friends

For all but the largest veterinary hospitals, having people on staff who are trained to perform all the services required by a hospice team is untenable. Making use of community members trained in aspects of animal hospice (e.g., mental health or nursing support) allows veterinarians and veterinary support staff to focus on the services they are best able to offer while ensuring that all the patient's and client's needs are being met.

The team approach to animal hospice can also alleviate the uneasiness that some veterinarians feel about relying so heavily on families to provide the level of care needed to keep a terminally ill animal comfortable. All team members should learn how to assess key quality of life parameters and bring any concerns to the attention of the caregiver and veterinarian. The time burden associated with frequently checking in with the family can also be spread amongst team members.

Animal hospice providers are becoming increasingly available nationwide. As of 2025, over 370 services were listed in a nationwide directory of in-home euthanasia providers, many of which offer home hospice care as well. When the attending veterinarian(s) is unable or disinclined to provide hospice services, referring the case to a local doctor who focuses on end-of-life care should be considered. Residential animal hospice facilities are another option, especially when the family is unable to proceed with euthanasia or provide adequate medical care to relieve suffering in the home environment. Locations like these, though, are few and far between, and to date, remain highly unregulated.

The decision to enroll a patient in animal hospice should not be reached without proper understanding of its obligations. Everyone involved assumes responsibility for the animal's and family's well-being. Caregivers must provide superior, not substandard care, and many clients will have limitations that make animal hospice too much of a burden. In these cases, euthanasia is appropriate when an animal's suffering cannot be relieved in any other way. The concept of a natural death may have little significance for domesticated animals. Caregivers have from the moment they enter under our care, such utter control over every aspect of our animals' lives and deaths that I'm not sure we can ever really, truly 'let nature takes its course.

How Can Animal Hospice Improve?

Increasing the availability of state-of-the-art animal hospice requires that veterinarians recognize the field's value and learn how to optimally care for patients and support caregivers during this stage of life. Client education is also vital. Caregivers need detailed information about the expected course of their pet's disease, how the palliative approach differs from the curative approach, and what services can be provided by veterinarians already involved in the case and which are available via referral.

The current norms of animal hospice can certainly be improved upon. Some changes are simple. For example, placing a deceased pet in a trash bag is contradictory to hospice's mandate to honor the human-animal bond. Specially designed body bags are much more respectful of an animal's significant role within the family. The use of designated hospice rooms remodeled for patient and caregiver comfort and/or increasing the availability of house call services also promote wellbeing during appointments. Another example is the use of better record-keeping systems and daily communication with caregivers.

Other improvements will take more effort to realize. The development of standards of care and protocols, which is already underway through the International Association for Animal Hospice and Palliative Care, is essential. The American Animal Hospice Association took a huge leap forward in 2021 by offering the very first accreditation to a mobile end-of-life specialty service.

Increased emphasis on the use of teams is critical. The veterinary profession needs to reach out to social workers, chaplains, human hospice providers, and other interested and knowledgeable individuals. The more stakeholders involved in animal hospice, the greater its reach and influence will be. With more community involvement, though, veterinarians should always remain the team's medical guide. As families begin to reach out for help with animal hospice care, a lack of veterinary involvement in their community will cause families to look elsewhere and this could invite substandard care providers into the mix. All veterinarians are encouraged to learn about hospice for this very reason alone.

Finally, research into how to best care for animals nearing the ends of their lives is sparse. Recognizing "end-of-life" as an official life stage would help focus attention on the needs of this population. When the veterinary profession classifies patients as "dying," it is all too easy to discount the value of their lives and fail to provide for their needs. In truth, our patients are living and all too often suffering as death nears.

This is a time of great evolution and momentum within animal hospice. As pets become more adored as family members and surrogate children, their entire lives will be handled with the utmost care and respect, and this includes the time around their deaths. As with any new leap forward, lasting change will take time, but by working together, we can improve the level of care a pet receives from the time it develops life-limiting disease to the moment the family says goodbye.

References

The American Association of Human-Animal Bond Veterinarians. The History of Hospice. Available at aahabv.org/index.php/end-of-life-hospice-care/74. Accessed Apr 4, 2021.

In-home Pet Euthanasia Directory, www.inhomepeteuthanasia.com

The Nikki Hospice Foundation for Pets. Veterinary Hospice Care. Available at pethospice.org/HOSPICE%20FRAME.htm. Accessed Apr 4, 2013.

Campbell CS, Cox JC. Hospice and Physician-Assisted Death: Collaboration, Compliance, and Complicity. *Hastings Cent Rep* 2010; 40,5: 26-35.

Pierce J. *The Last Walk*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2012; 129-155.

Shearer TS (ed). Palliative Medicine and Hospice Care. *Vet Clin Small Anim* 2011; 41: 477-702.

McMillan F. Rethinking euthanasia: death as an unintentional outcome. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2001; 219: 1204-1206.

Villalobos A. Let's Regard End of Life as a Distinct Stage. *Veterinary Practice News* 2012; Jan 4. Available at veterinarypracticenews.com/vet-practice-news-columns/bond-beyond/lets-regard-end-of-life-as-a-distinct-stage.aspx. Accessed Apr 4, 2013.

Cooney K. *In-Home Pet Euthanasia Techniques*. 2011; 4-5. Available at hometoheaven.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=68. Accessed Apr 4, 2013.

Become Certified in Peaceful Euthanasia

- Available to veterinarians, veterinary professionals, and practices
- Add CPEV or CPEP to your credentials!
- Earn 10 RACE-approved CE credits



Enjoy \$30 off!
Scan or visit
caetainternational.com/30



The Companion Animal Euthanasia Training Academy