

Pets and People (Week 25 Feb)

The Time to Say Goodby

Euthanasia is a difficult subject. Just contemplating the loss of a beloved pet brings with it a state of anxiety and sometimes denial. It is one of the most important services a veterinarian provides, as his or her experience can help guide a pet owner in making that decision.

Two of the most frequently asked questions I have to answer in relation to the sick or elderly pet is “when is the time to say goodbye?” The other question is “isn’t this a very hard thing for you to do?”

I like to help pet owners consider the realities of their pets' lives, as compared to our lives as pet owners. We, as their guardians, must assume the awesome responsibility of terminating life if that is in the best interest of the pet.

We, as pet owners must put their welfare before our own. We have a duty to determine their quality of life and help them maintain their dignity. Make no mistake about it, this is really hard to do.

One blessing for pets as compared to people is that they do not have a psychological sense of mortality. They live in the present and do not project into the future. As their trusted friends, we have the responsibility to ensure their “present” is comfortable.

Determining quality of life can be done in several ways. The first, and most important, is our observation of their behavior. Listed below are a few of the tell tale signs of diminished quality of life.

- 1. Lack of appetite**
- 2. Difficult ambulation**
- 3. Vocalization (sometimes from pain)**
- 4. Any observation of pain**

- 5. Increased thirst**
- 6. Chronic diarrhea or vomiting**
- 7. A mass that interferes with ambulation**
- 8. Chronic cough or difficulty breathing**
- 9. Lethargy unusual for age or lack of affection**
- 10. Sudden weight gain or loss or abdominal distention**

The above list in itself does not mean that something dire is about to happen. Symptoms like the above signal a need to determine their cause and seek a solution for a health related issue

If the problem is not obvious or if you are uncertain, a veterinarian can clarify what problems exist, and if they can be treated. You will need to determine if the treatment, being medical or surgical, is in the best interest of your pet.

This is the really hard part. There are some cases where the answer is obvious. An older patient with a large mass or tumor in the abdomen might provide a simpler solution than a younger pet. Your veterinarian, through the use of laboratory and imaging diagnostics, can offer a realistic appraisal of the prognosis. His or her experience can also be used as a guide in relation to the risks involved in treatment, the practicality of the treatments and the expense involved.

If the decision is made for euthanasia, it is made out of caring compassion for what is in the best interest of your pet. I am frequently asked the question, "Is this is very hard thing for you to do?" It is an emotional experience to say farewell to a patient who has become part of our larger family; however, at the same time, I appreciate that this is one of the most important services we can offer.

There has been much consideration about the kindest and gentlest way to perform euthanasia. First of all, the environment is important. If performed in a veterinary facility, it is pain free, and there should be a private undisturbed area to be with the pet and the

veterinarian. The pet owner should be able to have private time as required.

Some veterinarians will come to your home if you prefer. The aftermath of the loss should not be underestimated, as a lingering sense of loss and sadness will persist. When this is severe there are grief counselors who can help.

It is a loving, courageous act to help your pet come to the end of its journey on earth, but if you ask yourself the right questions, the answers will lead you to making the right decision. Cherish the times you have had together and appreciate the consideration you have given in releasing the pain and anxiety illness brings, while maintaining a dignity so richly deserved for the years of joy and unconditional love you were able to share.