As with any first meeting, it is important to begin strong and ensure caregivers feel safe and comfortable in your abilities to provide care for their pet. This happens through your compassionate nature, your early attention to detail, and your capacity to portray confidence and skill. For many caregivers, they have never experienced animal hospice. You will be called upon to enlighten them to all the possibilities and support them every step of the journey. This will all begin with the initial hospice consultation and set the foundation for all future care.

The hospice consultation can take place in a variety of ways. It can begin with a phone conversation to gather much of the necessary information to formulate a plan of care. It can begin with the caregiver filling out paper or electronic intake forms to be later shared with the primary veterinarian and hospice team. All hospice consultations must eventually culminate, though, in a visit to see the pet in person. The primary veterinarian on the case must lay their skilled hands on the pet to create the all-important true Veterinary/Client/Patient/Relationship (VCPR). This being said, with today’s modern technology, telemedicine is becoming more mainstream and great medicine can be accomplished via these means. Ultimately, it should still be a priority to see the pets in person and really understand the full scope of their medical needs whenever possible.

In these proceedings, I am going to outline the fundamental components each consultation should include. Much of this is taken from my own experiences as president of Home to Heaven, P.C. in Colorado. Other concepts are taken from the IAAHPC Animal Hospice Guidelines and the Veterinary Clinics of North America (VCNA) book on Palliative Medicine and Hospice Care. I would like to put some focus on the work of Dr. Tami Shearer, editor of the VCNA book. In it, she describes the Five-Step strategy for comprehensive palliative and hospice care. The steps are listed below:

1. Evaluation of the pet owner’s needs, beliefs, and goals for the pet
2. Education about the disease process
3. Development of a personalized plan for the pet and pet owner
4. Application of palliative or hospice care techniques
5. Emotional support during the care process and after the death of the pet

The hospice team can use this Five-Step strategy in forming the hospice plan of care. During each subsequent visit or phone call, these steps should remain top-of-mind and be adjusted to best meet everyone’s needs.

Integral Components of the Hospice Consultation

Safe Setting
- Home is ideal to see the pet and family in their natural environment
- Supportive loved ones present
- Quiet with limited distractions
- Hospice intake questions gathered by personnel ready to listen and learn the full story

Good Communication
- Open-ended questions
- Strong eye contact
- Really hearing what the caregiver is sharing

History Taking
- Learn about the pet’s signalment and health history – need intake form
- Understand prior death experiences; how they will shape this pet’s care
- Diet, current medications, lifestyle - all-important to know

Caregiver Psychosocial Concerns
- Financial limitations
- Family/friend support
- Religious/spiritual beliefs
- Work schedules
- Wishes for/against hospitalization or additional professional support
- Primary and secondary caregiver roles (who is responsible for daily care)
- Expectations – What do caregivers really want in hospice?
- What do they know about the disease already?
- How do they envision the care going forward?
  - Are they expecting a peaceful natural death?
  - What are their fears, hopes, goals?
Physical Exam

Thorough examination of the pet’s body – checking for:

1. Overall body condition (heavy, thin, wasting, coat condition)
2. Attitude (bright, quiet, obtunded, etc)
3. Signs of disease (cancers, organ disease, etc)
4. Signs of neglect (urine scalding, pressure sores, matting, long nails)
5. Signs of pain – chronic or acute

It is important to establish trust during this exam so the pet will feel comfortable with future visits

The physical exam solidifies the Veterinary/Client/Patient/Relationship

Paperwork

Intake form – to gather all information regarding pet and caregiver (this can be shared among team members providing support)
Full description of the services you offer, care plan options, and pricing
Plan of care – directions on how to carry out your recommendations
Legal consent to accept hospice services

Some other forms you should strongly consider:
  Controlled substance agreement
  Zoonotic disease risk form
  NSAID release form

Resources worth sharing with caregivers:
  Daily health log – for recording changes in health and behavior
  Pain scales – pertinent to the species you are working with
  Information on commonly prescribed medications
  Quality of Life scales
  Information on decision-making
  Handouts on local aftercare facilities – crematories, pet cemeteries

Disease Education

Describe the pet’s various diseases/conditions to the best you can
Provide disease trajectories and a list of expected progressing changes
Illustrate what pain looks like so caregivers can better recognize it
Be open and honest about everything you see for the betterment of care and to prevent suffering
Disease education is an ongoing process throughout the hospice journey
Education eliminates fear (fear is crippling in hospice)

**Personalized Plan**
Design a plan of care that is best for the caregiver and the pet – must take into account all above factors
Discuss the plan thoroughly so everyone understands expectations
1. Cost of services
2. Communication needs
3. Hospice recheck/visit schedule
4. Filling/refilling medication protocols
5. Hours of availability and who to call in an emergency
6. Fully describe HOW to implement the pet’s care

Most hospice consultations run anywhere from 1-2 hours in length. If everything cannot be covered in the time you have, utilize follow-up phone calls and emails to continue the conversation. One thing you will likely have to do after the initial meeting is fill medications. Many mobile hospice providers don’t carry medications with them and will need to fill prescriptions later. This can all be done shortly after the consult.

Many new services are unsure how much to charge for hospice consultations. In general, you have to base the price on the following:
1. Staff wages
2. Travel time/mileage to the home if necessary
3. Cost of informational materials/handouts
4. Follow-up phone time
5. Other overhead expenses – utilities, taxes, insurance, record-keeping, marketing, etc
6. Reasonable/comparable to other services in the area

Once you know how much it will cost to offer a hospice consultation, increase the fee above cost to make profit. Bringing in profit will provide financial resources for additional training, supplies, and more. Home to Heaven charges $225 for a daytime in-home hospice consultation. It is the same fee as a home euthanasia. We charge this based on the 6 factors above and people are very willing to pay it.

At the conclusion of any hospice consultation, you want to make sure you met the caregiver’s needs, the pet’s needs, and your own. If all went well, you have
the information necessary to provide amazing care throughout the entire hospice journey. My primary professional goal is to make sure the caregiver feels supported, understands every change they see, and knows how and when to reach out to me. I want them to feel blessed and happy to spend time with their pet all the way up until death, in whatever form that takes. My secondary goal is to make sure I keep accurate records and legally protect myself (and my team) every step of the way. As the hospice field develops, more light will be shed on this area.

References: