UNDERSTANDING ANIMAL HOSPICE

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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 denial of treatment. Hospice recognizes dying as a normal process, whether or not 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.¹ 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.² While our complete patient in animal hospice includes both the pet and caregiver, the veterinarian’s role as a pet patient advocate is vital.

The exact services provided through animal hospice are case-dependent. Examples could include:

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.²

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 have 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
For all but the largest veterinary hospitals, having people on staff who are trained to perform all of 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 of 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 2013, 200 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 in 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.

Another concern that can prevent some veterinarians from providing or referring patients for hospice care is the mistaken idea that pets in hospice cannot be euthanized when their quality of life becomes unacceptable. Statements drawn from the field of human hospice like “hospice neither hastens nor postpones death” promote a limited impression of animal hospice. In fact, it is the almost unanimous conclusion of animal hospice workers that hospice should be provided “until such time as death occurs naturally, the ultimate goal with appropriate care, or the caregiver decides to euthanize.” Euthanasia services should be available if the client and veterinarian at any time believe this humane act is appropriate.

Disagreements between practitioners must not be allowed to limit the growth of hospice care in veterinary medicine. Controversies still exist in human hospice, including the role of...
palliative sedation and physician-assisted death, but that has not stopped the field from entering mainstream thought and becoming the standard of care.

The decision to enroll a patient in animal hospice should not be reached without proper understanding of its obligations, however. Everyone involved assumes responsibility for the animal’s and family’s well-being. Caregivers must provide superior, not sub-standard 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. Currently available opportunities for continuing education are somewhat limited but include:

- International Association for Animal Hospice and Palliative Care webinars and conferences
- Nikki Hospice Foundation for Pets conferences and training seminars
- Spirits in Transition conferences and online courses
- Pet Loss Professionals Alliance webinars and conferences
- Presentations at local, regional, or national veterinary conferences
- The Palliative Medicine and Hospice Care issue of *Veterinary Clinics of North America: Small Animal Practice*

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 antithetical 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 well-being 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. Respect must also prevail on both sides of the debate over the role of euthanasia in hospice care. Professionals who practice animal hospice in a way that closely mirrors human hospice should affirm that, when used appropriately, euthanasia is meant to end an animal’s suffering with death being the unwanted outcome.\textsuperscript{10} Traditional veterinarians should also be open to the option of natural death as long as the patient is impeccably supported throughout the process.

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 remain the team’s medical guide at all times. 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.\textsuperscript{11} 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 have the opportunity to improve the level of care a pet receives from the time it develops life-limiting disease to the moment the family says goodbye.\textsuperscript{12}

\textbf{Footnotes}

a. inhomepeteuthanasia.com

\textbf{References}


