



# Tender Mercies

Prioritizing quality end-of-life care for pets

by Jen Reeder

THE DEATH OF A BELOVED PET CAN be intensely heartbreaking. For Tiffany Ma, DVM, it was also life-changing. She had adopted Lucky, a papillon mix, in 1999 while studying at the University of California, Davis. The loyal pup became part of her family and was kind to kittens Ma fostered over the years.

But by the time Lucky was 16, he was blind and suffering kidney failure, among other ailments, despite a lifetime of Ma's care. "I came to the realization that I couldn't fix him getting old," she said. "Then I started doing hospice care."

For 2 months, Ma focused on pain management, hydration, and trying to ensure Lucky had a decent quality of

life. He was her first hospice patient, and she found the time helped her emotionally prepare for the inevitable. Then, in early 2015, she took Lucky to her mother's home and euthanized him in the presence of 15 family members who gathered to witness his passing. It was the first time she'd performed an at-home euthanasia, and she was struck by how healing the experience was.

"In clinic, you always want to be a healer and save all these lives," Ma said. "Now I see hospice care and in-home euthanasia as another form of healing."

So she decided to specialize in end-of-life care for pets. Ma, owner of Compassion Pet Hospice in Castro Valley, Calif., and a veterinarian with Ask.vet, said it's a specialty

that's valued by committed pet owners. Her mobile services include at-home consultations, hospice care, and euthanasia (which she will also perform at public parks and beaches, where legal).

"Animals are very good at hiding pain, so it's easier to evaluate pain in a home setting because they're more at ease," Ma said, adding, "Clients who seek my help are the really dedicated clients. It's truly my honor to help them through the crisis."

Ma is one of a growing number of veterinarians across the country who are recognizing the importance of providing compassionate end-of-life care. Offering quality hospice and palliative care and euthanasia services can be crucial in best serving patients, reducing staff compassion fatigue, and retaining clients.

Kathryn Jennings, membership and marketing chair of the International

Association for Animal Hospice and Palliative Care (IAAHPC), said the group has grown from 25 members in 2008 to nearly 400 members in early 2016. Founded in 2008 by Amir Shanan, DVM, the organization is dedicated to promoting comfort-based end-of-life care for companion animals and hosts an annual conference for veterinary professionals. More than 200 people attended in 2015.

"It most certainly is a growing field," Jennings said. "Many veterinarians and their staff are finding that their clients are asking for more services related to not only patient support, but support for the whole family when it comes to making end-of-life decisions."

Jennings said advancements in veterinary medicine have led to pets living longer and, in turn, people spending more time as their caregivers. That time further strengthens their bond with the animal and makes end-of-life decisions even more excruciating.

"We're looking at people who need more support at making the most gut-wrenching decision a pet parent can ever make: when and where to say goodbye. They never want to do it too soon but they don't want to wait too late," she said.

"Veterinarians are the first people who are going to dismiss the grief or acknowledge it.... When we help people at the end of life with their pet, what we're doing is helping them go from the dark of grief into a healing journey, and they'll be more apt to enter into another relationship with another pet."

Mary Gardner, DVM, cofounder of Lap of Love Veterinary Hospice, a network of veterinarians dedicated solely to end-of-life veterinary care, said her group has also seen rapid growth—from one veterinarian in 2009 (Gardner's

business partner, Dani McVety, DVM) to more than 80 in the United States. She agreed that providing compassionate end-of-life care is key to helping people be

able to adopt another pet after having to euthanize one.

Gardner said in 2012, Lap of Love conducted a survey of 2,000 nonclients who had lost their pet in a clinic. A full 20% said they wouldn't go back to their veterinarian—half because they felt they couldn't love again and the other half because they had a bad experience or felt judged by the veterinary team.

"It's probably the most important time in that owner's life with the pet. They really need a lot of support and guidance," Gardner said. "Our goal is if that experience goes well, when they're able to love again that they will—so that this doesn't traumatize them. What can we do to help that pet owner not feel judged?"

Gardner said improving end-of-life care helps pets and clients but is also better for animal hospital staff because it reduces compassion fatigue. Her suggestions include:

**Make it easy for the front desk staff to schedule the appointment.** Clients are often crying when they call to schedule a euthanasia and should not be put on hold. The reception team should have immediate access to the pricing, which should only include two prices: one for euthanasia and one for aftercare. "This appointment you do not itemize," Gardner said. "Make it one big package so they can just say, 'The end-of-life care appointment is \$150. The only thing additional is if you would like to have him cremated afterward. Have you thought about what you would like to do with him after?'"

Gardner warned it is a "huge mistake" to charge extra for an owner to be present at the euthanasia.



## Resources for Grieving Pet Owners

Association for Pet Loss and Bereavement: [aplrb.org](http://aplrb.org)

American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals' Pet Loss Support Hotline: 877-474-3310

Colorado State University's Argus Institute pet loss resource list:  
[csu-cvmb.colostate.edu/vth/diagnostic-and-support/argus/Pages/resources-national.aspx](http://csu-cvmb.colostate.edu/vth/diagnostic-and-support/argus/Pages/resources-national.aspx)

Day By Day Pet Caregiver Support: [daybydaypetsupport.com](http://daybydaypetsupport.com)

It discourages pet owners from attending, creates suspicion, and makes client service representatives uncomfortable.

**Do everything in your power to avoid removing the pet from the owner's arms.** "Why not sedate right in front of the owner? Do not break the human-animal bond at the most important time. Protect it," advises Gardner.

**Provide pet loss information and make a paw print afterward.** Gardner suggested making the clay paw print after euthanasia since many dogs and cats don't like having their paws touched, and it could be upsetting for the owner to see them jerk away. She's found

clients are typically pleased to get the print immediately afterward. "You hand it to them like a treasure," she said. "Doing it right then and there helps me and it helps them. But I can't tell you how many doctors say, 'I have 8 minutes in a room—I don't have time to do that.' Well, 20% of clients are not coming back to you—you'd better have time to do that."

**Sedate every pet, including drop-offs.** Gardner said sedation is the best thing for pets before euthanasia—don't ask clients if they want it, and give it to dogs and cats dropped off by owners who can't attend the euthanasia. "Why do we stick them in a cage and wait until we have a free minute and the technician just does it? That's what makes us sad when we see drop-offs. It should be a party for that pet in an exam room. That is what I would want for my own pet if I couldn't be present," Gardner said.

Christen Lynch, practice manager at AAHA-accredited Animal Hospital of Rowlett Veterinary Clinic in Rowlett, Texas, said the hospital offers at-home hospice care and

euthanasia, has a special comfort room for euthanasia conducted at the practice, and offers free monthly pet loss support groups for clients and anyone grieving a pet in the community.

"We started offering pet loss support groups 2 years ago mostly because we felt the need," Lynch said. "Clients would always express how hard it was and how long it took to get over the loss of their pet and how nobody understood."

So on the last Wednesday of every month at 6:45 p.m., Lynch joins practice owner Kimberly Downes, DVM, in the cozy cat lobby to welcome grieving pet owners to the group. There's a bulletin board on which people can post photos of their pet, poems they've written, collars, and other remembrances of the deceased animal. Lynch starts by reading an "angel list" of the names of animals who died in the last month, and then there's an open forum where guests talk about their pets.

"We usually have to ask some questions to get them talking," Lynch said. "We try to focus on the happy things: 'What's the funniest thing that your pet did?' or 'What was something that your pet always did with you during the holidays?' so they're telling the positive stories and not 'I blame myself for them dying,' which is usually where they try to go if you let them talk without any direction."

If a client does say something like, "I gave him a chicken bone the night before and that's what killed him," the veterinarian will alleviate guilt by gently explaining that 5 years of cancer was ultimately the cause of death, not the chicken bone.

The group concludes by lighting memorial candles, reading a poem together, and blowing out the candles. Lynch keeps business cards of professional therapists on hand for clients who need additional help. But the majority of the hour is spent listening to people share stories of their pets. Lynch said it is very common to hear attendees say the death of their pet was worse than the death of a relative. So, staff in attendance—some will even pop their heads in for a minute to acknowledge a pet owner—explain they understand and help validate that grief.

Lynch said feedback about the pet loss support group has been overwhelmingly positive. Not only has it bonded

## Communication Tips for End-of-Life Discussions

Because end-of-life discussions are uniquely sensitive, they require more time and finesse from the veterinary team. Mary Gardner, DVM, cofounder of Lap of Love Veterinary Hospice, shared these communication tips:

- Use "struggle" instead of "suffer"—you don't want to make clients feel guilty that an animal has been suffering.
- Say "the best thing" instead of "the right thing" when discussing euthanasia.
- Include yourself in discussions by using "we"—for instance, "What are we going to do?"
- Make eye contact.
- Listen.
- When parting after euthanasia, say, "I'll be thinking about you today" instead of "Have a nice day!"
- When greeting a pet you don't know that might be aggressive, ask, "Does he like meeting new friends?" instead of "Is he good with strangers?"
- Ask "Can I get a hug?" instead of "Can I give you a hug?" Then the owners are empowered to give you something and acknowledge you have also been affected.
- Don't write "I'm sorry for your loss" in sympathy cards. Make it positive with something like, "Rusty was so lucky to be in such a wonderful, love-filled family."



the practice to clients but it has also generated new clients. And it gives staff a chance to mourn patients they've known since they were puppies or kittens—the practice hosts the pet loss support groups even if no clients attend so that employees can have closure.

The group takes just an hour each month plus about 15 minutes to pull together a program, so the time commitment is minimal, Lynch said. She highly recommends other practices consider implementing pet loss support groups.

"It's a cool thing that AAHA practices can offer to continue being a step above everyone else," she said.

Marianne McClain, CVT, MBA, CCRP at AAHA-accredited Riverview Animal Hospital in Durango, Colo., said the practice has had success offering senior dog classes to promote mobility. Attendees pay \$120 for six 1-hour lessons, during which McClain teaches them massage, acupressure, and muscle-strengthening exercises.

"What I have seen is that we keep them alive longer because people don't euthanize as early. If a 100-pound dog can't get up, you don't have a lot of options," she said. "But if we can keep them mobile, not only will we be able to stop them from euthanizing for a mobility problem

but that quality of life for the last 3 or 4 months of their life makes a huge difference."

One of her patients, a Great Dane mix named Buddy, improved so much that he is now a therapy dog for children re-learning to walk. Such results inspire gratitude and loyalty in clients, she said.

Eva Evans, DVM, MBA, is planning to open a practice called City Pets Animal Care in Nashville, Tenn., this summer. She said it will focus on pain control and on palliative and hospice care to promote quality of life.

"With animals, it's especially important because we can't justify pain to them," she said. "They don't understand that this pain is only temporary or if you're doing chemotherapy or radiation that it's for their own good."

So her practice will offer traditional medicine as well as alternative modalities like acupuncture, e-stim (electrical stimulation of acupuncture needles), laser therapy, acupressure, and massage. She grasped the value of these therapies when her Jack Russell terrier, Kelly, had liver cancer and couldn't metabolize drugs like anti-inflammatories and oral pain medications. She intends to offer package deals for treatment options like acupuncture and laser therapy, since those tend to work best with repeated visits.

Evans hopes awareness of the importance of providing top-notch end-of-life care will continue to spread throughout the veterinary profession.

"We all understand the importance of preventive care with puppies and kittens," she said. "But I think we also need to focus on end-of-life care just as much and not let these older pets suffer with chronic pain that we can help relieve." ■

## For More Information

**Compassion Pet Hospice:** [compassionpethospice.com/index.php/us](http://compassionpethospice.com/index.php/us)

**International Association for Animal Hospice and Palliative Care:** [iaahpc.org](http://iaahpc.org)

**Lap of Love Veterinary Hospice:** [lapoflove.com](http://lapoflove.com)

**Animal Hospital of Rowlett Veterinary Clinic:** [ahrdrv.com](http://ahrdrv.com)

**Riverview Animal Hospital:** [riverviewanimal.com](http://riverviewanimal.com)

**City Pets Animal Care:** [evaevansdvm.com](http://evaevansdvm.com)



Freelance journalist Jen Reeder found herself giving her dog lots of extra treats and snuggles while researching this article.