

Euthanasia in animals: Option or Obligation

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Abstract

Euthanasia can be a morally complex and stressful part of veterinary practice however; it is regarded as far less controversial than euthanasia in humans. The advisability of euthanasia and the scenarios under which practitioners are justified in actively offering, or passively allowing euthanasia is still a debate. Veterinarians refuse some requests for euthanasia that they feel would be unethical. The human-animal relationship should be respected by discussing euthanasia openly, providing an appropriate place to conduct the process, offering the opportunity for animal owners to be present, fully informing about what they will see, and giving emotional support and information about grief counseling as needed.

Keywords: Animals, Decide, Disease, Kill, Life, Pain

Death is a fundamental and omnipresent element. Death is usually regarded as a foe to be feared, combated, and, if all works well, conquered. However, in certain circumstances prolonging life may prolong a patient's agony (Benrubi, 1992). This unsettling outcome has ignited heated discussions over the advisability of euthanasia and the scenarios under which practitioners are justified in actively offering, or passively allowing, pain-ridden, comatose, and/or terminally ill patients to die peacefully (Singer and Siegler, 1990).

In human medical settings, the *sanctity* of life is given primacy over the *quality* of life which leads to a rejection of "mercy killing" (AVMA, 1988). Though it is a matter of considerable concern in animal rights circles, the killing of non-human animals typically is regarded as far less controversial in the larger society than is the killing of humans. Euthanasia can be a morally complex and stressful part of veterinary practice (Gardner and Hini, 2006) and may even be a

cause of mental health issues within the profession. Therefore, practitioners might be expected to consider refusing some requests for euthanasia that they feel would be unethical. Understanding why practitioners refuse euthanasia or not may inform guidance documents and teaching programmes, assist policy making and provide insight into issues such as the high suicide rate among veterinary professionals (Bartram and Baldwin 2008).

Since animals are non-linguistic, they are thought to be incapable of comprehending pain, death, the future, or constructing and reflecting on their identities (Rollin, 1990). As a result, animals are often regarded as property to be owned or used by humans rather than autonomous players engaged in a mutually established interaction and therefore deserving attention more than accorded to any valuable property. The philosophical, scientific, and commonsensical arguments commonly offered to justify the human ownership, use, and eventual disposal of nonhuman animals i.e. to deny their personhood sometimes become problematic when they are applied to severely damaged neonates (Anspach, 1993) or more mature beings (Goode, 1994) who are ostensibly human but, lacking independence, language, the apparent ability to self-reflect, and other key attributes, may be relegated to the status of nonperson.

The emotional intensity of the relationships that often develop between people and their nonhuman companion animals commonly prompts human caretakers to be ambivalent about, or reject entirely, the definition of their animals as mindless, objectified, nonpersons (Sanders, 1993). Instead, they see the animals with which they share their everyday lives as unique, emotional, reciprocating, and thoughtful "friends" or "family members". Widespread uncertainty concerning, or outright rejection of, the animal-as-object perspective generates considerable societal ambivalence about the appropriateness of mistreating nonhuman animals, killing and eating them, using them as scientific instruments (Bowd and Shapiro, 1993), or callously disposing of them when they are "used up." Given the close ties that commonly develop between people and their animal companions, these philosophical and social policy issues become intensely personal when caretakers confront decisions regarding the provision of medical care and if, when, and how to manage their animals' deaths.

The human-animal relationship should be respected by discussing euthanasia openly, providing an appropriate place to conduct the process, offering the opportunity for animal owners and/or caretakers to be present when at all possible (consistent with the best interests of the animal

and the owners and caretakers), fully informing those present about what they will see (including possible unpleasant side effects), and giving emotional support and information about grief counseling as needed (Nogueira Borden *et al.*, 2010). Regardless of the euthanasia method chosen, it is important to consider the level of understanding and perceptions of those in attendance as they witness euthanasia. When death has been achieved and verified, owners and caretakers should be verbally notified (Martin *et al.*, 2004).

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