Preface

The Role of the Veterinarian in Hospice and Palliative Care

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Guest Editor

The intent of this issue is to give the veterinary profession the tools to care, not cure, when the burden of treatment has no benefit. The veterinarian’s role in providing good palliative and end-of-life care for pets is paramount. Until now, very little information was available on how to apply palliative and hospice care in the veterinary profession even though some veterinarians have been applying the principles of these disciplines for decades. In the past, the knowledge and application of symptom and pain management tools were not as advanced as today. Our ability to relieve suffering and improve quality of life has never been more powerful. These medical advancements give veterinarians more options to treat the symptoms of disease so the profession is able to preserve a longer quality of life in pets struggling with aging, chronic, and terminal illnesses.

Introducing palliative and hospice care as a recognized field of veterinary medicine will help to better serve pets with serious illness. The term hospice comes from the Latin word hospitium, which means to host. Hospice is defined as a facility or program designed to provide a caring environment for supplying the physical and emotional needs of the terminally ill. The term palliate comes from the Latin word palliare, which means to cloak or conceal. Palliate refers to alleviating symptoms without curing the underlying medical condition. Palliative care in veterinary medicine addresses the treatment of pain and other symptoms to achieve the best quality of life regardless of disease outcome. It helps families to understand the disease process and to make decisions. Palliative care also helps support the families emotionally. Hospice care is a specialized form of palliative care. It focuses on caring for patients that are in the end stages of terminal illness. Hospice care is an extension of palliative care that tends to patients that are nearing death. The foundation of both disciplines relies upon a philosophy of care.

Some interesting studies in human palliative and hospice care support the importance of embracing this type of care for pets. According to the New England Journal
of Medicine, human patients that received early palliative care for metastatic lung cancer had better quality of life at the end of life. These patients also experienced an increased survival time. It is reasonable to assume that the same might apply for similar disease processes in pets.

A study of 122 human caretakers showed that a lack of preparedness when a person was dying resulted in a prolonged grieving period of more than 9 months, with major depression. This study demonstrated that caretakers were nine times more likely to be depressed and were more likely to suffer from severe depression for 6-8 months than when loved ones were enrolled in hospice for less than 4 days. Because of the strong bond between some people and their pets, it is reasonable to assume that similar data may apply to the loss of a pet, thus highlighting the need for palliative and hospice care for pet owners.

Requests from pet owners for palliative medicine and hospice care are on the rise. As the human population ages and physicians refer family members into hospice care, exposure to human palliative and hospice care has increased. Those that have had a good experience with loved ones are seeking the same type of end-of-life care for their pets.

It is the veterinarian’s role to deliver palliative and hospice care on a case-by-case basis. Not all concepts of palliative and hospice care may apply to every pet owner because of the differences in belief systems of people about pets. The role that culture and religion plays in shaping those views can contribute to the care people seek for their pets.

The degree to which the palliative and hospice care philosophy is followed will vary because of differing viewpoints on dying. While some pet owners choose not to extend supportive care for terminally ill pets (in 2006, according to the AVMA's US Pet Ownership and Demographic Sourcebook, 17.3% of dog owners and 36.3% of cat owners did not use veterinary services), others choose to provide symptom management to keep their pets comfortable as long as possible. Hospice care is most important to families who do not choose or believe in euthanasia because of cultural or religious beliefs. Regardless of pet owner’s beliefs, the veterinarian’s role is to be there to care, support, guide, and educate. The profession needs to embrace an organized system and philosophy to deliver care to provide the best symptom relief for those pets. This should help prevent the suffering of a pet whose owner hesitates to seek care for fear of being judged about their beliefs about death. The role of the veterinarian should reinforce the commitment to find a solution for the problem and will continue to help no matter what.

With the evolution of palliative and hospice care in the veterinary profession, the veterinarian should consider referral for the specialized care or, better yet, expand the clinic’s services to include those services. Organized palliative and hospice care options may minimize the opportunity for substandard care or premature euthanasia because a veterinarian is too busy, is too distracted, or lacks symptom management skills. Palliative and hospice care allows for another alternative instead of performing convenience or premature euthanasia. It helps to insure the pet is comfortable up until the time that the pet dies naturally or until the need for euthanasia is determined with the help of the professional support team and family.

This issue is a collaboration of what we have learned over the years in pain management, symptom management, oncology, rehabilitation, ethics, and behavior. This information is brought together to help pets where there is a decision not to pursue curative treatment, where there is diagnosis of a terminal illness, or if symptoms of a chronic illness are interfering with the routine of the pet. The role the veterinarian plays in palliative and hospice care will continue to evolve with advancements in medicine and the gathering of statistics.
The purpose of this issue is to assist in providing palliative medicine and hospice care to pets in an organized, structured system that applies concepts of human palliative and hospice care where it applies to better serve pets with serious illness. It will provide a guide and resource for veterinary professionals who choose to apply the concept of hospice and palliative care. The potential to influence the standards of care in veterinary medicine has never been greater. Our overall goal should be the improvement of quality of life for the patients that are entrusted to our care and this issue will give the profession the tools to care when the pet cannot be cured.

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REFERENCES