

Develop a euthanasia protocol

Use these tips to manage euthanasia visits more effectively and show clients you care.

By Ronald W. Stone, DVM

As unpleasant as the circumstances sometimes are, euthanasia is a legitimate veterinary procedure. And our oath demands we do our best to end animal suffering when no hopeful alternative is available. Just like any other medical procedure, you need to learn as much as possible about its indications and complications and leverage past experience—yours and your colleagues'—to insure a successful outcome. Sadly, the outcome of this particular procedure will never be good, even when all goes smoothly. Still you can take steps to avoid client distress and confrontation. Some ideas: Review AAHA's tapes on grief and grief counseling with team members and stock the practice with booklets about preparing for the loss of a pet. Nothing causes more complications with clients than poor communication skills or an indifferent attitude from team members.

Offer clients a quiet room for a private last moment with their pet. Consider pre-sedating the pet with a fast-acting yet strong intramuscular agent. One of clients' biggest fears is that their pet will be frightened and will suffer even further during the procedure. Sadly, that does sometimes happen. Not all patients are tractable. Not all respond as rapidly as expected when given a single agent. And veins are not always easy to access.

Explaining how pre-euthanasia sedation calms the pet's fears and allows it to drift quietly off to sleep before the final injection gives most pet owners immense comfort. And in practices where the client is not allowed to witness the final injection, sedation gives the client some time to say goodbye while this first drug takes effect. Of course, it's much easier for the practitioner to perform the final injection on a sedated pet rather than on a struggling or aggressive one in pain.

Empathize with your clients and offer your condolences. You may have lost several patients this week. But this client only cares about the one in front of you now. So it's important to show you care.

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