Tips for Helping Clients Handle Pet Euthanasia

Explaining Euthanasia
Even when clients have decided they want to be present for their pet’s euthanasia, it is still important to establish what they understand about the process. This is not the time to make assumptions. Some clients will change their preference about being present based on your explanation, their prior experiences with death, and their current circumstances.

After years of practice, I find it interesting that a simple question, “Have you ever been present for a pet’s euthanasia,” is an easy, gentle way to open a conversation about the mechanics of euthanasia and the clients’ options when making decisions.

Even when meeting clients for the first time, when the circumstances are, at best, trying, it is important to explain euthanasia as appropriate. No matter the reason euthanasia has been elected—a diagnosed or long-standing severe illness, an unexpected but acutely manifest condition, a traumatic accident, or acute poisoning—you can help clients understand the euthanasia process and deal with their grief after their animal has died. It does not take much time.

Be Flexible
Clients will change their minds. The veterinarian should give them not only the practical explanations about euthanasia, sedatives or tranquilizers, intravenous catheters, and options for disposal, but also allow them the option of changing their minds. Say, You clearly love Chubbers. If you want to stay with him, that is fine. If you choose not to, that is fine, too. We will hold him and tell him you love him. Also, If something is happening during the euthanasia that is upsetting to you, it is okay to turn away or leave the room.

Explain to clients that their pets will experience the same anesthetic process as when going under anesthesia for a spay, neuter, or dental cleaning humans receive for a dental or surgical procedure, which may alleviate anxiety for clients who do not want to be present, but feel some pressure or guilt to stay. Their pet has no existential understanding that this particular injection will cause its death. Euthanasia is no different than a routine anesthesia, except for the intended outcome; this understanding may make it easier for some clients who do not want to be present, because they feel reassured about their pet’s comfort.

Tailor Your Approach
Begin with, I’d like to explain how euthanasia works, if that would be helpful. Some clients will already know and not want to hear it again. Others will want to know all the details; still others will let you know just how much information they want. Give children special consideration and use appropriate language that they will understand. Do not use the term “put to sleep,” and remind parents not to use it, especially with younger children, who may become fearful of falling asleep. It is okay, and appropriate, to use the word “dead.”

Explain in Simple Terms
Explain that the special euthanasia medication is used for euthanasia only, but it is the same type of medication that has been used to induce anesthesia. Explain that, initially, the pet will lose consciousness as if he or she were being anesthetized for a dental procedure or surgery. Explain that the euthanasia solution is used to cause a deliberate anesthetic overdose that affects the brain centers that control breathing and the heart beating, and the pet will then die comfortably while already unconscious. Give clients the option of a sedative or tranquilizer for their pet and explain how that will affect the animal. Some clients will want their pets heavily sedated prior to euthanasia, while others will want them fully conscious so they can give comfort as the euthanasia solution is administered.

Manage Expectations
Make sure clients know that unconsciousness and death occur very rapidly and their pet may die before the injection is completely administered. Also, explain that some patients make movements and noises, and sometimes their eyes will not close. If the patient is a dog, explain that some dogs make movements or noises and their muscles may twitch. If the patient is a cat, explain that cats’ eyes will not close.

A few years ago, I was sitting on the examination room floor, visiting with a client after her dog had been euthanized. The pet had been dead for probably 3 minutes when it “screamed” briefly, when an apparent massive diaphragmatic contraction forced air through the vocal folds. It was disturbing, to say the least, and after ensuring that the dog was, in fact, dead, I explained to the client what had happened. I have never seen that again, but know other veterinarians who have. I now warn people about this very rare possibility, using my experience to illustrate what might happen.

Provide Support
The best support for clients during these delicate last moments with their pets is for veterinarians to be clear, take time, be flexible, and make sure their questions are answered. It is a final gift that is valuable beyond measure.