

When Your Pet Dies

Scarcely twelve hours after visiting relatives left for home after the holidays, my daughter's panicked cry from the basement told me that something was desperately wrong. Cooper, our six-year-old English Springer Spaniel, barely able to stand, was panting in pain at the bottom of the stairs. We took him to a nearby clinic the next morning, avoiding a drive across town to his regular vet in four feet of snow. The diagnosis was Immune Mediated Hemolytic Anemia. The consultation left us puzzled. The doctors deflected my questions about euthanasia. Six weeks of around-the-clock nursing, special diets, lesions, and incontinence said that he was not getting better. Reluctantly leaving him at a special kennel when we had travel to a funeral, we returned to find him in distress. The clinic that had been treating him would not see him. I dropped him off at his regular vet, and he lay down and died a couple of hours later. The second clinic didn't have special facilities for grieving pet owners, but they showed the utmost kindness and compassion in everything they said and did. I think kindly of them when I think of Cooper's death. I don't think kindly of the first.

Before Cooper's death, I had focused exclusively on the needs of humans who grieve other humans. Pet owners may have been overlooked by the medical profession, but veterinary medicine is doing all it can to make sure that we remember them. My awareness began with a conversation I overheard between two women in a downtown Denver bistro a few years ago, never thinking it would apply to me. The discussion was unlike anything I had imagined growing up in rural southeastern Oklahoma. They talked about their dogs, but were they describing euthanasia or hospice care? It was hard to tell from what they said. Each spoke in turn of the death of their beloved family pet, describing in detail how the medical staff had prepared them for the event, how the whole family took part in every decision, of their plans for remains and memorializing, and how they could not have imagined doing it any other way. They seemed very much at peace. The service they received was new to me, but in no way unique. In fact, it was readily available when asked for, and more and more pet owners today are asking for it. Unfortunately, no one recommended it when Cooper died.

Dr. Kevin Fitzgerald, one of about thirty doctors at the Alameda East Veterinary Hospital in Denver, attends four hundred deaths a year. He says he is amazed at the changes he has seen in how families respond to the death of their pets in his twenty-five years of practice, simply noting that "it is not the same world." More humans today grieve for their pets as they would grieve the death of a human loved one, perhaps because our pets have become more family member than companion and helper. No one knows for sure, but the grief responses are as varied and can be as intense as in human death, and sometimes they require real attention. Alameda East relies on professional mental health workers for training and guidance when helping their grieving clients. But the need does not stop there. They also recognize the effect of pet death on veterinary medical doctors and staff, and are just as determined that they receive the support they need to get through the emotional challenges they face.

Pet hospice has emerged as a popular end of life choice for families when a pet dies. Encouraged by the American Veterinary Medical Association, its guidelines for practice include a recommendation that the care team be prepared to make competent referrals to licensed mental health professionals with training and experience in grief and bereavement. Local veterinary hospitals report that they consult bereavement counselors when needed. The Center for Animal Wellness in Denver designed its new hospital with an area dedicated to end of life counseling, euthanasia, and bereavement support. Pet bereavement support groups grow more common every year.

Supporting the needs of bereaved pet owners is becoming an integral part of veterinary medical training today. In Colorado, the Argus Institute for families and Veterinary Medicine employs a full time team of professional mental health and bereavement workers to work alongside student doctors at the Colorado State University's veterinary teaching hospital, teaching communication and empathy skills, and modeling how to slow the process down and take the time to find out what works for every family. Self-care and colleague-care are central to their training. The Institute's website, www.argusinstitute.colostate.edu, is a resource treasure for bereaved Colorado pet owners. At the University of Tennessee, the schools of social work and veterinary medicine collaborated to create a field placement for social work interns in the veterinary teaching hospital. Social workers attend to the needs of families, animals, and medical staff. Motivated to respond to the growing role of our animals in our lives, their eventual goal is to have these social workers placed in veterinary practices around the country, and to prepare social workers to recognize and serve the needs of grieving pet owners.

Death follows life. When our pets die, the adjustment to life without them can be as difficult as when a human loved one dies. Pet owners may need the same kind of emotional support when pets die as when humans die. A phone call or an internet query to find pet loss resources could yield much more information than you might think. It did for me. If faced with the death of your pet, you may be able to find the resource you need, too. It is worth a try.

Many of the caring veterinary professionals I have talked to suggest that veterinary medicine lags behind human medicine when it comes to end of life care and supporting the bereaved. Maybe - but they are narrowing the gap.