

When is it time to say "Goodbye"?



There was a consultation the other day, here at Coombefield Veterinary Hospital with a client that we hadn't seen for some time, and when we checked the records it was clear that we had not seen them since their pet was a puppy. Honestly, this is how we wish it was the entire time - healthy puppy enjoying a good life, and a few visits to the vet at the end. There are thousands of books on what to do with a new pet, how to train them, how to cope with them, how to choose them, and many of them are useful tools. However, there is very little written about what happens at the other end of the timeline.

When we take on a new puppy or kitten it seems almost inconceivable that they won't be around almost forever, but in truth, 15 or 16 years is probably about a reasonable life expectancy for a cat, and with dogs the reality is often a lot less. Whilst small breeds of dog like a Jack Russell or Yorkshire terrier can often live to a ripe old age of around 16 years, larger breeds often don't manage anything like that and sadly, the average life span of giant breeds, such as Irish Wolfhounds or Great Danes, can be as little as 4 - 6 years.

Obviously we don't like to dwell on such things when our pets are young, but old age creeps up very quickly and the prospect of them dying or suffering from debilitating illnesses is something that often has to be addressed.

I think I am pretty much right in saying that for most people the idea of dying peacefully at home in our own bed would be the least frightening prospect, and a lot of people I talk to with elderly pets often express the wish that they would come down one morning to find their animal has died in their sleep. That, perhaps, is the ideal – and one of the great advantages of it is that it “lets us off the hook”, so to speak. The prospect of bringing one's dog or cat to the surgery in order to have their life ended is not a pleasant one, and one that most people really don't want to think about – but it is my view that in the vast majority of cases it is really doing our pets a great service. I am certainly not one to advocate euthanasia simply because an animal has reached a particular age. I think it is much more likely that, for lots of good reasons, people find it easy to put off the fateful day and find excuses to convince themselves that the time

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hasn't yet come. There are many instances when the decision to put a pet to sleep is not especially difficult – for example where there are severe injuries causing unmanageable pain, after a shattering road accident, for instance, or when a very old dog has a terminal illness for which there is no longer any prospect of recovery; but there are also more difficult occasions, when there may not be severe pain but there is no longer any real ability to enjoy any quality of life – we have to be very careful consequently that we are not making any assumptions or judgements from a human perspective. And I'm sure most vets have at some time or another been faced with having to destroy a healthy young dog because of acts of aggression – a situation which is always very difficult – especially when you think that but for a different upbringing such situations may have been avoidable.

Having said all that, I do feel that it is the responsibility of the veterinary profession to help these animals end their lives in a painless and dignified way. I'm approaching 50 now and have been working in the veterinary industry for 10 years but have had pets all my life and I can't number how many times I have seen animals die, but I know that the vets I work with have, on many occasions, been called to a pet who, for quite understandable reasons, has been allowed to struggle on to a point at which realisation has finally dawned on the owners, that it is kinder to bring life to a close with a "helping hand". I know that some people will disagree with me, those who feel that purposefully ending a life is intrinsically wrong, that it is "playing God" but these decisions are never taken lightly and I do feel that, for the vets I have worked with, they feel it is their responsibility to prevent suffering, and whatever the cause of that suffering, I am positive that euthanasia is a legitimate way to end that suffering if there is no reasonable alternative.

When the time has come, and a decision has been made, circumstances may vary a lot, but it is often possible with prior notice, to arrange for it to happen at a time when the veterinary surgery is quiet, when there are not lots of other people in the waiting room, and owners can spend some time talking with the vet or a nurse about their pet and about what they would like to happen. Sometimes people want to be with their pet throughout the whole process, sometimes they want to say goodbye almost at the door. I believe everybody has different ways of handling such situations and we certainly don't think less of someone who doesn't want to stay to the bitter end. It is often a difficult enough time anyway without having to put ourselves through any avoidable stress and upset. I think that because cats and dogs are so dependent on us as their owners, we tend to feel a burden of responsibility and even guilt about making such a decision. I don't believe there is any reason to feel guilty. As I have often said to owners, it is a very brave decision in the first place to make the appointment and drive in: it ultimately would be far easier to go away and postpone the decision. It is the pet that is benefiting by a release from pain and suffering and it would be irresponsible to shirk the decision.

Many owners feel that their pets benefit greatly from being put to sleep in their own homes – in the comfort and security of their own basket or on "their" blanket or "their" armchair. The potential stress of being taken to the surgery is avoided. Every Practice I have worked at has always tried to accommodate such requests, taking a qualified veterinary nurse along as well. Again there is always time for talk – a confirmation that the right thing is being done, in the privacy of their own home.

We use the euphemism "putting them to sleep" – not just to avoid having to say clearly what it is we are doing, but because that is really exactly what happens. Every day of the week, cats and dogs are given anesthetic injections for operations. To them, this final injection is no different – it is really just an overdose – and we have no reason to think that it is an unpleasant

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experience. They do literally appear to just drift off to sleep, and they do genuinely seem to be at peace.

I am, regretfully, at some point in the not too distant future going to have to have my beloved 13 year old dog put to sleep. For all of us pet owners THAT day is always going to arrive – from the first moment you acquire that puppy or kitten – I, like all owners and vets, just hope that there will be many, many happy years of companionship in between.



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