

GUIDELINE 10

EUTHANASIA OF ANIMALS

Registered veterinary practitioners should ensure they are familiar with the contents of this Guideline. The Board considers this Guideline to be the minimum standard expected from a registered veterinary practitioner exercising reasonable skill and care in the course of providing treatment to animals.

Practitioners should read this Guideline in conjunction with the Definitions listed in the introductory pages.

10.1 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

10.1.1 Unwanted or abandoned animals and those which are stressed, diseased or disabled to such an extent that their condition cannot be satisfactorily relieved by veterinary care, should be humanely destroyed to relieve suffering or prevent further suffering.

10.1.2 This ethical principle has been incorporated into various statute laws and codes of practice and is used as a guiding principle by the judiciary, especially when deciding on issues relating to animal cruelty.

10.1.3 The veterinary profession has always supported this ethic. When supporting this principle, registered veterinary practitioners do so principally for the benefit and welfare of the animals concerned, but must be careful to consider the emotional well-being of the owner.

10.2 RESPONSIBILITY FOR EUTHANASIA

10.2.1 There appears to be little difficulty if the owner is available and agrees to the registered veterinary practitioner's recommendation. If the animal is insured and a claim is to be made, it is the owner's responsibility to advise the insurance company which can then arrange an inspection by its registered veterinary practitioner (if this is appropriate and does not adversely affect the welfare of the animal or unacceptably delay euthanasia). The registered veterinary practitioner employed by the insurance company is ethically bound to advise the client's registered veterinary practitioner of the time and date when the examination is to be made.

10.2.2 A difficult situation arises when an animal is in great pain and is considered to have terminal illness but the owner refuses to permit euthanasia. In most cases, it is best to concentrate on persuasion, and the addition of other opinion (other registered veterinary practitioner or the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA)) may sway the owner. The only other rational procedure is to humanely destroy the animal against the owner's wishes, but the case would need to be an extreme one, and obtaining the agreement of at least two other senior experienced registered veterinary practitioners would be advisable.

10.3 CONSENT FORMS

10.3.1 Veterinary practitioners should take reasonable steps to establish the authority of the person presenting the animal to make decisions in these situations. Such authority can be presumed to exist when the practitioner has taken reasonable steps to establish that the person presenting the animal, is:

- (i) an established client associated with that animal;
- (ii) the owner of the animal;
- (iii) the authorised agent of the owner of the animal;
- (iv) a person with day-to-day responsibility for the care of that animal at the time

"Reasonable steps" in this context would include the practitioner directly enquiring of the person that they fit one of (i) to (iv) above, and should be associated with the use of a consent form on which the person declares they are the owner or acting with the authority of the owner.

10.3.2 If the animal and client are unknown to the registered veterinary practitioner, the person presenting the animal should be asked to sign a euthanasia consent form. Parents' authorisation should be obtained when minors present animals for euthanasia.

10.3.3 Where any doubt exists that the person presenting the animal for euthanasia may not have the common law right to do so, a registered veterinary practitioner must ensure that a euthanasia consent form is completed and signed. In the absence of a written authority the euthanasia of the animal should be refused and the person clearly informed of the basis of such a refusal, unless over-ridden by the need to destroy the animal on humane grounds.

10.4 LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS

10.4.1 When the owner of an animal is unknown, the first responsibility of the registered veterinary practitioner to an injured animal is to relieve its pain and suffering. If an animal is too badly injured or too ill to warrant prolonging its life, it can be euthanased by the registered veterinary practitioner, but every effort should be to contact the owners. It is best not to take the decision to destroy an animal in these circumstances without some other person being present as a witness and to agree that euthanasia was necessary. If an owner subsequently appears, he/she may prosecute on the grounds of loss of personal property. On the other hand, failure to perform euthanasia on a badly injured animal might be considered to constitute an act of cruelty. Medical records should be kept identifying as best as possible, the animal and the procedure.

10.4.2 The Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1986, defines an act of cruelty at section 9 (1) as:

A person who -...

- (c) *does or omits to do an act with result that unreasonable pain or suffering is caused, or is likely to be caused, to an animal;*

and, ...

- (i) *...is the owner or the person in charge of a sick or injured animal and unreasonably fails to provide veterinary or other appropriate*

attention or treatment for the animal;

commits an act of cruelty upon that animal and is guilty of an offence.

10.4.3 The Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1986, further provides in sub-section 22(1) that a veterinary practitioner has the power to destroy an animal which :

S21 (1) (c) (ii) (A) is behaving in such a manner and in such circumstances that it is likely to cause death or serious injury to any person; or

(B) is found abandoned, distressed or disabled if its condition is such that it would continue to suffer if it remained alive;

10.4.4 This section of the act extends the common law on euthanasia of animals to specifically allow a registered veterinary practitioner to destroy an animal in certain circumstances without reference to the owner of the animal.

10.4.5 Clearly a registered veterinary practitioner would not exercise this right if the owner was available to be consulted. But, if the owner is not readily available the right should not be ignored and the registered veterinary practitioner should not refuse to act in the interest of the animal concerned.

10.4.6 The Veterinary Practice Act 1997 provides for penalties for unprofessional conduct by a registered veterinary practitioner.

10.5 EUTHANASIA OF A COMPANION ANIMAL

10.5.1 It is helpful, as part of their grieving process, to encourage clients to remain with the animal whilst it is destroyed and actively participate in the euthanasia process by holding some part of the animal, such as, head or paw, and talking calmly and soothingly to the animal. However, it is essential that no animal be destroyed in the presence of the owner unless all the required factors to enable a professional result to be achieved are in place – positioning of the animal, access to a suitable vein, holding of the animal by an experienced assistant, adequate equipment during a house call. If experienced assistance is unavailable then proper sedation of the animal prior to euthanasia is essential.

10.5.2 When a person presents a normal, healthy animal for euthanasia this should be carried out without the imposition of moral judgement by the registered veterinary practitioner or practice staff as the consequences of such action may impair the welfare of the animal and be quite unfair to the person concerned. In the case where a practice has a moral objection to the euthanasia of healthy animals, there is an obligation to refer the owner, without moral judgements being imposed, to a practice which does not have this objection.

10.5.3 When the decision to destroy an animal is made it must be done without unnecessary delay, but all clients should be given the opportunity to be alone with the animal before euthanasia actually takes place.

10.5.4 Prior to destroying any animal all administrative details such as determining the client's wishes regarding disposal of the body and payment of the account, should be finalised.

10.6 METHODS OF EUTHANASIA

- 10.6.1 Registered veterinary practitioners are advised to consider options for the method of euthanasia which will produce a painless and peaceful death. The use of a humane killer or firearm for large animals, such as horses or cows, although it is traditional and practical, may provoke an adverse reaction if there is a public audience. This method should not be used unless the registered veterinary practitioner can be confident that the euthanasia can be performed with a single shot and without risk to animal handlers or bystanders.
- 10.6.2 If barbiturates or other anaesthetic agents are used to euthanase animals which could subsequently be utilised as pet food, the registered veterinary practitioner must advise the owner or responsible agent that the carcass must not be used for pet food. Similarly, the carcass must not be sent to a place (e.g. knackery) where it may be used for pet food.
- 10.6.3 A useful reference on the subject of euthanasia is provided by the report of the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) Panel of Euthanasia¹, prepared by the AVMA Panel on Euthanasia, at the request of the AVMA Council on research. This report was published in the journal of the AVMA, 1993.

¹ McDONALD et al., (1993) Report of the AVMA Panel on Euthanasia, JAVMA 202: 230-249