Pet owners’ expectations of veterinarians in end-of-life situations

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Context
In 85 per cent of cases, a pet animal is considered to be a fully accepted family member, social partner or sibling and also has an important influence on the health of the owner. As such, owners’ expectations have grown with respect to the veterinary care that their pet receives. Consequently, one of the most difficult moments for veterinarians is the time when a pet’s life can no longer be supported to an acceptable quality. The veterinarian then has the difficult task of explaining the animal’s condition and performing euthanasia, which is an emotionally difficult situation for both the owner and the veterinarian. In view of the strength of the bond between the pet and the owner, death creates new concerns about disposal of the animal’s body and the end-of-life communication should also include a discussion of the options for the disposal of pet remains.

Feedback from pet owners using a telephone helpline, in the context of euthanasia, cremation of animals and mourning, revealed many uncertainties and questions around euthanasia and the disposal of the animal’s body. The aim of this study was to evaluate how many owners who had experienced a pet loss by euthanasia had been satisfied with the act of euthanasia, what constituted reasons for dissatisfaction and what were the consequences for the client-veterinarian relationship, and to evaluate the owners’ needs and expectations of the veterinarian associated with their pet loss and end-of-life assistance. It was hypothesised that there would be differences between rural versus urban clients and between clients of specialised hospitals versus generalists’ practices, as well as influences of client age and gender, the type of pet animal and the daily time spent interacting with the animal on the clients’ needs and expectations of the veterinarian associated with euthanasia.

Main conclusion
Veterinarians play an important role in informing their about euthanasia and the disposal of pet remains and in supporting them during the process of mourning.

Approach
A questionnaire was filled out by pet owners during their visit to a veterinary clinic. In total, 2350 questionnaires were produced: 150 were given to university clinics, 500 to larger small animal clinics, 1200 to small animal practitioners and 500 to mixed veterinarians. Questionnaires were filled out by clients consecutively visiting the individual practices and hospitals for any kind of consultation.

Results
Of 2350 questionnaires distributed, 2008 were returned and available for analysis. Owner satisfaction concerning the procedure of euthanasia was high (92 per cent, 1173 of 1272). The explicit reasons for dissatisfaction were an inability to be with their pet during euthanasia; too cold and quick treatment of the client by the veterinarian; insufficient information about the procedure; inappropriate treatment by staff; and/or too detailed explanations. After their pet was euthanased, 14 per cent (170/1250) had changed their veterinarian, even though 75 per cent of these 170 had been satisfied with the procedure. Changing veterinarians after the experience of euthanasia was not linked to the client’s gender, age, family condition, area of living or veterinary specialisation; however, the more time owners had spent with their pet, the more likely they were to have changed veterinarian after euthanasia.

Regarding personal wishes in relation to euthanasia, 33 per cent wished that their companion animal could die at home; 53 per cent wanted to personally choose the time of euthanasia; 70 per cent wanted to be together with their pet during euthanasia; 23 per cent did not want to wait in the waiting room before euthanasia; 15 per cent did not want to pay the bill immediately; and 5 per cent wanted to have the opportunity to talk to the veterinarian after their pet had been euthanased.

Those living in urban areas were more likely to want their pet to be euthanased at home than those living in rural areas. Similarly, urban residents were more likely to want to have the opportunity to talk to the veterinarian after euthanasia.

Most owners (88 per cent) expected veterinarians to talk about their pet’s final destination, and 38 per cent expected this to happen early in the pet’s life. For 81 per cent of clients, the veterinarian was the primary informant about the possibilities concerning the disposal of pet remains, and 33 per cent indicated their veterinarian as the contact person to talk about pet loss. Planning what to do with the pet remains became more important while the pet was still alive with increasing client age. Also with increasing age groups, the veterinarian became not only more important as the informant about the destination of the pet remains but also as a contact to talk about the pet loss. Owners without children reported thinking more often about their pet’s remains during its lifetime and also were more likely to expect the veterinarian to talk to them earlier in the animal’s life or if the animal was ill or old about the possibilities of the final destination of the pet remains.

Interpretation and significance of findings
The study discloses the high importance of veterinarians for clients in many aspects of pet loss. Client expectations and wishes around euthanasia only marginally depend on the area where they live or the level of specialisation of the clinic visited. Euthanasia and the final destination of pet’s remains are highly sensitive topics and veterinarians have to recognise individual client needs.
Veterinarians' role for pet owners facing pet loss


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