

Industry in need of standards and guidelines

Also supportive of the development of industry guidelines is Ms Phillips from Furry Souls, the largest supplier of urns in the country. As a supplier of urns to the human funeral industry as well and member of the Independent Funeral Association, Ms Phillips has an interesting insight comparing pet and human funeral industries.

"Pet people seem to grieve deeply compared to humans because they do not have the same support when a pet passes. When a human passes, there is family support and a Funeral Director to organise everything," said the director, who also assists clients with cremation and grief counselling. "Death comes as a shock to pet owners for the love they've lost and the reality of the animal not being around."

Since beginning to run her business seven years ago, Ms Phillips has seen a significant turnaround in the acknowledgement of pet loss and grief. Pet owners want the very best for their animals – it's not about burying them in a shoebox in the backyard, she said.

"People want to celebrate the life of their pet and do the right thing when they farewell them, like they would a human. But many people aren't prepared for their pet's death, don't think about the cremation process and don't know where to go. Unless they're at a vet, they are at a loss," she said. "There's some improvement in the support that's out there, but we still have a long way to go."

The majority of cremation businesses are doing a good job and moving with the times in the service and support they provide, she stated.

"They are animal lovers, have clean premises, systems and procedures in place. They are treating animals with respect, are empathetic and sympathetic, show compassion and are honourable with giving back the ashes of pets. But some older ones are blinded by change and not investing, and then wonder why their business is going backwards," she said.

At the end of the day, the most important question pet owners have about

cremation is 'How do I know these are my pet's ashes I get back?' They often don't know what is happening behind closed crematorium doors and rely on their veterinarian's trusted referral.

Ms Phillips believes veterinarians need to be held more accountable for the end of life process. "Vets have a moral obligation to visit the crematoriums they refer their clients to," she added.

Investing in equipment and personal service

Mr Whiley, a former policeman from Pets at Peace Central West pet cremation service, takes pride in the investments they have made with purchasing cremators from the United Kingdom and the personal service they provide clients. Unlike some other pet cremation services in major cities, his company - which he has operated for 13 years and had the crematorium for eight years - deals with all the clients directly.

"We give clients a funeral director as such," he explained. "We speak with them about what they would like, what goes on the plaque. We pick up the pets from their home or vet with special vehicles and when the ashes are ready, we deliver them back to their home instead of the vet clinic. This means more work for us, but it's better customer service."

Pets at Peace is a small operation, servicing 80,000 square kilometres and a population of about 750,000 people in country NSW, and it has been quickly expanding to double capacity!

"We have seen exceptional growth in just the last few years. We grew with the business but now it's starting to grow faster than anticipated, averaging double-figure growth every year," he revealed. "In October, we had the biggest month ever compared to the year before. We also had two months this year when we broke all-time records. Yet, I'm just scratching the surface. I know that a lot of pets are left at the vet clinic aimed for the landfill."

Mr Whiley said the Australian pet cremation industry is in its infancy compared to the USA and UK, but he believes it has a positive future ahead. Pet crematoriums in Australia would benefit from industry guidelines to ensure they're doing right by people's pets in the

cremation process, he said.

Another successfully growing pet cremation service is that of the Animal Welfare League of South Australia – the only not-for-profit and registered charity in the state (and probably Australia) that provides pet cremation services.

The AWL Pet Cremations service is a true example of a 'profit for purpose' business, with all proceeds providing funding to care for lost and abandoned pets. AWL CEO Richard Mussell explained the charity is also in a unique position where it provides services for the entire life cycle of the animal.

"Many people are comforted by the fact that the AWL team are the people cremating their beloved pets, because they can draw heartfelt strength in the knowledge that by using our service, all proceeds go towards helping other animals desperately in need of the kind of love and care that their own pet experienced," he said. "In other words, through their own loss, they can give other pets hope for a better life and to be loved."

The AWL has been providing pet cremations for more than 20 years, operating from its main site in Wingfield. After identifying that the operation required more space and new equipment, the charity designed, built and developed a new, purpose-built facility – one of very few in Australia – to provide professional and dignified 'back of house' services. Completed in August this year, the facility features a new eight-chamber private cremator, a new equine cremator (also used for communal cremations) and walk in cool rooms with dignified shelving space and equipment to move animals, large and small.

While the crematorium mainly caters for dogs and cats, other animals such as guinea pigs, reptiles, rabbits and even fish, and larger animals, including horses, sheep,

