

Because animals are living much longer and for a lot longer with chronic disease, and with the increased 'value' of pets as members of the family, people want to continue supporting their pets at a much higher level. "As palliative/geriatric care is on the rise, consequently, quality of life assessments are being used a lot more often and need to be a lot more stringent and rigorous in their application," said Dr Ende.

The 'house call' vet receives regular requests for euthanasias or assessments of more elderly patients, and part of his service is offering quality of life assessments, and management of pain and cognitive/behavioural issues, which are essential in such patients.

"It can be very difficult for owners to objectively assess their pet's quality of mental and physical health, and consequently many elderly pets are suffering to some degree. Our goal is to try to minimise this as much as possible and to guide and educate people, and support them through these extremely difficult decisions," he said

"I'm very honest and up front with my clients and essentially give them the options available to them," he began to explain. "Firstly, we can do the euthanasia wherever they would like, so I let them choose the place in their home, often on the pet's bed or on laps or in the garden."

Dr Ende once had a client ask him to take two muscle samples from his rescue dog that had to be prepared fresh and in a special way, so that it could be sent to America where it would be kept in cryostorage pending breakthroughs in cloning. "I did this straight after the euthanasia with him helping me on his dead dog in his bedroom. It was quite an experience! He's one of my loveliest clients and obviously very devoted to his dogs, which he usually gets as surrendered pets," he said.

Interestingly, vet emotional health is also on the veterinary industry's radar as suicide rates are increasing along with industry burnout and other difficulties, explained Dr Ende. "The emotional impact on vets is very high from dealing with palliative care and euthanasia, and being the 'support' person through many of these experiences," he said.

“People are seeking ways of honouring their pets in their deaths in ways they would also treat their human family.”

How can we improve the end-of-life process to make it less stressful for pet owners and veterinarians alike?

"Improvements in managing euthanasia is always possible - more vets using sedation and acknowledging the imperative that the pets are 'stress free' and 'pain free,'" he said. "Also, I think the most difficult part (of euthanasia) in fact for many vets and nurses is managing the owner's emotions and handling the human family around this time. Much more can be done during training to teach and support this process, and in many vet hospitals much more can be done to manage the vets' emotional state following euthanasias or the deaths of patients they may have become close to. There is rarely any time or space set aside for vets and nurses to go to recover and acknowledge their own feelings."

Euthanasia not an easy decision to make

Internationally-known "Cat Vet" and feline veterinary behaviourist Dr Kim Kendall from Sydney's Chatswood Cat Palace also shared her experience euthanising cats. She considers being "the agent of release a privilege". "Many more animals than I care to think of have to travel the same road as people in their terminal stages. It's not pretty, but it is their karmic journey," she said. "Palliative care and assisting in the final stages, including euthanasia, is a growing field especially in the USA where there are franchises for 'pawspice' (the animal equivalent of hospice). I think it's very worthwhile to bring comfort to the animal and the owner in its own home." A veterinarian plays a very important role in guiding their clients in the decision-making process, but "cannot and should not take ownership of the pet's end of life. It is the owner's duty and emotional journey to dictate the path of terminal decline," she explained.

"I tell owners that once there is a terminal diagnosis, all the extra time is for the owner, NOT the animal, and they need to think about the fact that the animal is living every second of that terminal existence - good or bad. Euthanising

an animal - almost for any reason but certainly once a terminal state is reached - from a mature viewpoint, is humane."

Veterinarians need to encourage pet owners to think about their pet's end of life and discuss it with their family prior to actual euthanasia. "It is surprising how different the opinions are for people in the same family, so it does need discussion. It turns out a lot of mid-life grief can stem from unresolved pet death issues when the people were children," she said.

Veterinarians should not take ownership of an animal's end of life, as Dr Kendall advised, but what about for the aftercare process that follows? Often people find it too difficult to decide what they wish to do with their pet's body.

"Often, they don't really know what they can do," said Dr Ende. "I advise I can look after the body for them; take the pet away, organise cremation with or without having the ashes of their pet returned to them. This is the most commonly chosen option. The other option is to bury the body in their home, which some people also elect to do."

Vet training in aftercare industry important

Greencross Limited has instilled a successful self-regulated process across its large network of clinics to ensure staff and clients are supported through a pet's end of life stage.

"We have developed standards and guidelines and spent a lot of time invested in training staff in providing care and respect in the conversations that arise with pet owners," said Darren Maier, Greencross Chief Operating Officer of Vet Services. "We help our vet teams to understand the impact of pet loss on clients and how to have the right conversations with them. The training comes from years of experience in handling these situations. The more training we've done, the more we've built our own standards, expectations and guidelines in providing care and respect in the right way."

In 2013, Greencross acquired the Pet Cemetery and Crematorium in South East

