

Room to Care

Pet loss and the issue of euthanasia is an emotional subject. Paula Hanson, talks to a local Vet about a very special room in his surgery.

His passion for animals is clearly obvious on meeting him. His 30 plus years in the veterinary industry hasn't reduced the lustre in his eyes when two year old border collie, Lucky comes in with his owner to have his stitches removed. He greets the dog with more bedside manner than a few GPs I have encountered over the years. With a gentle rub behind the ears and a shake of the paw, Dr Duncan McGinness has made a special connection with the dog and there seems to be an instant understanding of trust.

For many humans, choosing a GP to monitor our health is just as important as choosing a vet for our beloved pets. I met Duncan for the first time as a 12 year old girl presenting with my beloved Pete, a huge black and white cat, who had been kicked by a horse and was badly injured. My mother recounted that moment to me many times over the remaining 15 years of that cat's life. I was distraught, and Duncan was politely trying to indicate the options to my mother on what could be done for my pet. My mother's response? "Do whatever it takes." Over 20 years ago that required rewiring his jaw and I spent the next six weeks feeding my beloved cat with a syringe to keep him alive, and bathing him daily (which he didn't appreciate).

These days there are many options for our pets when they become ill. Owners of dogs and cats with cancer are seeking advice from specialty veterinary oncology practices regarding chemotherapy and radiotherapy. And unfortunately the extension of life for the pet it not always encouraging, it may prolong the lifespan by three, six, nine months, but the quality of life is often hampered by the intensity of the drugs, and it is an incredibly expensive exercise.

But such is our attachment to our pets that, as with humans, we will do anything to have more time with our loved ones, despite the cost. We have palliative care environments for humans when the end of life approaches, methods to keep them comfortable and care so family members can say their goodbyes in an environment that is non-clinical and relaxed (as possible). We then have a period of mourning, a funeral and more mourning. This is socially acceptable; it's appreciated that we will be sad for some time after losing someone close to us.

So when the life of a beloved pet approaches its end or when that pet becomes ill we reach out to the trusted vet. Unfortunately sometimes there's nothing that can be done. It's a hard decision; it's an unwanted decision (in most cases) and it's usually done with a heavy heart – euthanasia. There's much debate on the pros and cons of euthanasia for humans, which is outside the scope of this article. But for pet owners (not a term endeared by all) it's a difficult decision and a difficult process to go through, especially when the attachment to the animal is as close a bond as that of a human-to-human bond.

"I don't have high expectation of emotions; I just don't ever feel judgement towards a pet owner when they come to the surgery and have to make that decision," says Duncan McGinness. "You just never know the emotional attachment one has with their pet. We just want to support them once that decision has been made. They make the decision and we support it, regardless if it's a medical or financial decision. "I think it's really important for people's long term well-being following euthanasia of a pet that we are non-judgmental regarding the decision. If it's based on money, and sometimes unfortunately it can be, and we don't support it, how awful is the outcome for that pet owner?"

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their decision because it's based on financial decisions...that doesn't lead to good outcomes."

In Duncan's surgery, there's a euthanasia room. It's not your typical veterinary examination room. There are no steel benches and veterinary medical equipment. It is nicely furnished with a leather lounge, a timber coffee table and a soft floor rug. Duncan designed this room for people to say good-bye to their pets in a non-clinical environment. Somewhere comfortable, away from the waiting room and other examination rooms, where the barks and meows of other pets cannot be heard. The client is given time on their own, to say goodbye.

"We have found that the more time the owner has with their pet after they are deceased or has the option to do so, the better the outcome emotionally for them. "Hopefully we can provide a less traumatic experience, as you cannot predict how an animal will respond and so forth. Making it as easy as possible under controlled circumstances is what we aim for."

Duncan says a "normal" consultation room doesn't provide that circumstance.

"We didn't have the time to allow the client to stay with the animal and then they also had to walk out front to the rest of the waiting room. It just didn't seem good enough to me.

"We found that we had people requesting not to use a certain consult room because that's where their previous pet had been euthanised and it was an unpleasant memory for them. It made us start to wonder whether we needed a dedicated space."

You only come to this room if you need to make the decision or the decision has already been made. It's going to make the process just that a bit easier for people. Standing around a clinical, stainless steel consulting table – which is a necessity for those areas – does not make the goodbye comfortable. With the euthanasia room, it's a little easier with a few homely features to make it less clinical, less confronting and a bit kinder.

"It polarizes people.

There's the pet people who are immersed in it and feel like they understand it totally and then there are the people who don't have pets and they don't get it. "

And unfortunately the room is used daily, on average. Duncan also does house visits, which he supports as this can also be the best environment for pet and owner.

Duncan has seen the shift in the recognition of pet loss throughout his 30 years in the industry. It seems an emotional shift and how people are engaging with their pets – they are generally much more connected with their pets; they're family members and the bond is binding to the family, which means they're looked upon as a family member.

"There's definitely less of a stiff upper lip these days when it comes to pet loss, particularly with us blokes who are least likely to express themselves.

"Older males, like myself, now tear up at the national anthem – things we never used to do; your emotions seem to surface more readily, and you may not be prepared for it.

"It's hard to express grief and be comfortable in talking about it. Dad died four years ago," says Duncan. "It's a significant loss. I find it easier talking to people whose fathers are really ill, but I'm still grieving myself, and it feels like it's taking an extremely long time and I don't want to stop grieving, but I guess I thought there would be a time limit, and it was something I hadn't anticipated; I just didn't realise it takes as long as it takes."

It's the same for pet loss, he says. "It polarizes people. There's the pet people who are immersed in it and feel like they understand it totally and then there are the people who don't have pets and they don't get it. "

And for some whose pet is nearing the end of its life, the trusted vet, is the one person who does "get it". "We want the best support possible for the client," says Duncan.

When the pet has become a family member, the notion of expense can be difficult. Commercially, people spend more on their pets than ever before, pet foods and accessories are the top 10 items purchased in supermarkets, and advertising tends to focus on buying these items to show how much you love your pet. The pressure can be the same with the offerings of oncology treatment and so on. The pet owner has to make the decision that's best for them and their pet and their financial situation. No one should be made to feel guilty for

making a decision to euthanise a pet because of financial reasons.

“We never mention euthanasia at a first consult,” says Duncan. “It can be obvious when a client presents with an elderly immobile dog that they know the end is near; what they don’t want to hear is euthanasia.

“They walk away thinking, “all he wanted to do was put him down”. We don’t want people to have that heartache. We discuss the options, and in most cases, the client will know euthanasia is an option and we then discuss it openly with them.”

The other discussion will also surround the disposal of the pet’s remains.

“There are companies that now cremate pets so people can then scatter the ashes, keep them in an urn or so forth, or bury them in their garden.”

The culture has really shifted; there are memorial services for pets, headstones for pet graves and websites dedicated to forever memorialising pets. And it doesn’t have to be expensive to be meaningful.

“One or the other doesn’t mean you love your pet any more or less. There’s just options these days. We offer all the options to the client,” says Duncan.

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My first experience of pet loss was at about six years old, when the stray cattle dog we adopted had a litter of pups a week later and the runt did not survive. My brother helped me create a makeshift coffin out of two used milkshake containers and we wrote The Lord’s Prayer on the outside before burying it in the backyard.

So what do we tell children when a pet dies or needs to be euthanised? Dr Duncan says he often has children attending with their parents when a pet is near the end of life.

“It can be sometimes a softer or gentler introduction to loss. It really depends on the

closeness to the pet and the age of the child, but yes we do have children wanting to see the deceased pet.”

Duncan says it helps if he can make it “a good death”. “If that is such a thing,” he says. “But if I am acting normally and not upset; non emotional but supportive, however grieving Mum and Dad are, if children sees someone who is together about it and not hiding from death or loss, and being open that we are preventing suffering – this is a wonderful thing to offer.



“When their pet has very little to look forward to or has been in pain and we can end that pain – what a wonderful gift we can give to that pet and make it a shift from sad negative loss to “wow what a wonderful gift we can give to end their suffering – a pain free nice departure from the world”.”

Duncan is a great supporter of the NALAG book Grandpa's Hat. He offers copies of the book for sale in his Surgery.

"It is a wonderful book for children, and I love the pet analogy for creating resilience in children following loss.

"Some people feel the loss so deeply and I often wonder if there are unresolved losses in the client's history that are compounded by their current situation. When it's total, wheels-off devastating, I believe there's more involved - that's why I'm so grateful that there are services like NALAG.

"In my surgery my staff and I try to make every experience positive. So for whatever reason they come, we give as much support as we can offer and make the whole experience as positive as possible.

"Just knowing NALAG is there to offer assistance, even if some people don't take up the offer, it gives people such peace of mind. The support NALAG offers is unreal and who else does what you guys do?"

Duncan hands me a cheque for a donation to NALAG – funds collected through donating a percentage of all vaccinations performed in the surgery over the past two months.

He is apologetic that it's not more but hopes it can contribute to the work of NALAG.

Gratefully, Pete, my huge black and white cat did one last act of kindness for me and died in old age in the front garden of my parents' home. Thankfully I never had to make the decision to euthanise him. I buried him in a blanket my grandmother taught me to crochet – reminding me of yet another special bond we shared.