CVM Companions: Supporting the Human-Animal Bond

University of Florida Veterinary Medical Center

SMALL ANIMAL EUTHANASIA

Making the Decision

The term “euthanasia” derives from two Greek words, Eu meaning “good” and thanos meaning “death.” Phrases that you may have heard to describe euthanasia include “put down,” “put to sleep” and “mercy killing,” although the latter is most commonly used when referring to people. In veterinary medicine, euthanasia refers to the act of helping an animal to die a painless and dignified death. Due to illness, disease or injury that a pet is experiencing, or as a result of personal circumstances, many people are faced with deciding if euthanasia is the best option to be made for their pets. Because of the strength of the human-animal bond and the important role that our pets have in our lives, considering euthanasia is the most difficult decision many pet owners will have to make for their pets. The relationship shared with a pet who has cancer often intensifies after the diagnosis for many reasons including multiple visits to the veterinarian, closely monitoring and worrying about your pet, the time you spend caring for your pet, concerns about your pet coming out of remission, and learning the importance of making the most of every day you have with your pet. Your oncology team members understand the difficulty of making the decision of whether to have your pet euthanized and are here to offer you support during the decision making process. Medical staff will answer any questions concerning your pet’s disease process, symptoms, and quality of life and counseling staff are here to give you emotional support through the decision making process.

It is important for you to remember that the final euthanasia decision is yours and you should never allow someone to make that decision for you. It also is important to remember that no decision is ever perfect. There always will be pros and cons of both euthanasia and natural death, and each animal and family’s situation and belief systems are unique. These factors add to the complexity of the decision making process but by talking with the neurology team, educating yourself on your pet’s illness, and evaluating your pet’s quality of life, we trust that you will make the best decision for your family and your pet and we will support you in the choice that you make.

One of the most frequently asked questions about euthanasia is “how will I know when my pet no longer has a good quality of life and that it is time to consider euthanasia?” While not every animal expresses pain and discomfort in the same manner there are some general guidelines to consider. Following are some things to think about when evaluating your pet’s quality of life:

Nutritional Factors

• Is my pet still interested in food and water?

• Can my pet eat and drink without assistance?

• Can my pet keep food and water down?

Comfort Level

• Does my pet experience pain that cannot be controlled?

• Is breathing difficult or uncomfortable for my pet?

• Is nausea a problem for my pet?

• Does my pet have any uncontrollable movements such as circling or pacing?

• Do I have to force my pet to take medications and if so, what degree of discomfort does that cause my pet?

• Does my pet have bowel and bladder control?

Mobility

• Can my pet walk and move from place to place without assistance?

• Can my pet change positions without assistance?

• Can my pet move without experiencing pain or discomfort?

Interaction

• Does my pet still interact with me and other family members?

• Is my pet still enjoying life?

• Does my pet still greet me when I come home?

• Does my pet acknowledge my presence or respond to me?

• Does my pet seem to be spending more and more time alone or away from the family?

Questions to ask the oncologist

• To what degree can my pets discomfort be controlled?

• Given my pet’s specific illness, what will eventually cause her death?

• Given my pet’s specific disease process, is it likely that dying a natural death will be painful for my pet?

Other factors that influence the euthanasia decision:

Finances – cost of treatments, special equipment, medications, veterinarian visits

Time – for medical needs of your pet, veterinary visits

Philosophy or religious beliefs – does your belief system prevent you from making the decision to euthanize your pet?

Things to ask yourself

• Is my pet’s illness or disease process going to get progressively worse? In other words, if your pet is painful or suffering today and tomorrow will most likely only be worse, what is his quality of life?

• Has holding on to my pet become more painful and difficult than letting go?

• If I could ask my pet to make this decision, what would she say?

• Six months after my pet dies, when I look back on this time, what will make me feel better to know?

Following is information on the euthanasia process which might answer some of the questions you have and help you with the decision making process. If you decide against euthanasia one of the oncologists will talk with you about palliative care for your pet which means making the last days or weeks of your pet’s life as comfortable and pain free as possible.