Timely Euthanasia and Impacts of Euthanasia on Caretakers

J.K. Shearer, DVM, MS
Professor and Extension Veterinarian
Iowa State University
College of Veterinary Medicine
Ames, Iowa 50011
JKS@iastate.edu
"Being admitted to the profession of veterinary medicine, I solemnly swear to use my scientific knowledge and skills for the benefit of society through the protection of animal health and welfare, the prevention and relief of animal suffering, the conservation of animal resources, the promotion of public health, and the advancement of medical knowledge.

"I will practice my profession conscientiously, with dignity, and in keeping with the principles of veterinary medical ethics.

"I accept as a lifelong obligation the continual improvement of my professional knowledge and competence."

(Approved by the Executive Committee, November 18-20, 2010.)
Paradox of the Veterinarian’s Role

“Veterinarians are trained to help in nature’s healing process, but we also treat our patients with the knowledge that some of them will ultimately be slaughtered for human use. At other times, we are called upon to perform euthanasia, not always for humane or medical reasons.”

Examples:
- Slaughter of animals for human consumption
- Euthanasia to manage overpopulation of dogs and cats

Euthanasia to manage overpopulation of dogs and cats

According to the ASPCA website, of the 5-7 million companion animals entering shelters nationwide each year, 3-4 million (60% of dogs and 70% of cats) are euthanized.
The Caring and Killing Paradox
The “Caring and Killing” Paradox

• Experienced by shelter workers, laboratory animal technicians, young people in 4-H and FFA and many more...
  – Marked by depression, grief, and other destructive behaviors including alcoholism and drug abuse

On the farm...

Workers who care for animals hoping to see them prosper and grow, but as injury or illness occurs they are suddenly thrust into the role of one responsible to euthanize them.
On-Farm Euthanasia

• Euthanasia of down, injured or debilitated animals
  – Easier but not easy

• Euthanasia of normal animals for market reasons
  – Very difficult
“I have had to euthanize cows for producers who could not do it for themselves,” Many beef producers become very attached to the animals they care for, and they get a true satisfaction in caring for the animals in their possession.”

“To treat animals morally requires that we understand their mentational limits.”

Bernard Rollin
The power of Thought and Reasoning in the Context of Suffering

Animals compared to Humans
“Human thought is irreducibly tied to language, which allows us entry into modes of thought closed to animals.”

Bernard Rollin
Human versus Animal Cognition

- Humans
  - think in “abstract terms” (logic or mathematics)
  - In “negative terms” (there are no dragons in the library)
  - In “conditional terms” (if it rains, we’ll hold graduation indoors)
  - In “universal terms” (all triangles have 3 sides)
  - In “futuristic terms” (I plan to retire in Florida one day)
  - In “fictional terms” (writing a story or novel)
  - In “counterfactual terms” (if Edison had not discovered the light bulb, someone else would have)
Human versus Animal Cognition

• Humans are able to endure short-run negative experiences for the purpose of achieving long-term goals
  – Examples:
    • The person who diets to lower blood pressure
    • People memorize volumes of boring material for the sake of gaining admission to veterinary or medical school.
    • People endure the excruciating pain of cosmetic surgery to look better.
    • People will endure chemotherapy, radiation, dialysis, physical therapy, and transplants to achieve longer life and a better quality of life than they would have without it

“It is unlikely that animals understand the concepts of life and death; instead, *they understand only the pleasures and pain associated with life and death.*”

*In the animal mind – there is only “quality of life” It’s painful or not, hungry or not, thirsty or not*

Bernard Rollin
Moral Stress
“Moral Stress”

• Arises among people whose life work is aimed at promoting the well-being of animals,

• The shelter veterinarian or worker responsible for euthanizing unwanted dogs and cats

• The researcher who finds her/himself complicit in creating pain, distress, disease, and other noxious states demanded by a research protocol

Various surveys have been conducted on the percentage of pet owners who view their animals as members of the family.

The lowest number attributes such a view to 88% of the pet owning population; the highest ascribes it to 98%.

For Pet Owners...
“As animals have continued to become recognized as members of the family, people have become more and more reluctant to euthanize them.... Oddly enough, the new stress is dealing with clients who are unwilling to euthanize suffering animals; instead continuing treatment regardless of the animal’s quality of life.”

Bernard Rollin
The Human Toll
The Impact of Moral Stress

A recent UK study indicates that the rate of suicide in the veterinary profession is at least three times that observed in the general population

Euthanasia Compassion Fatigue
“Compassion Fatigue is emotional exhaustion, caused by the stress of caring for traumatized or suffering animals or people”

Charles Figely, Ph.D.,
Director, Florida State University Traumatology Institute
Symptoms of Compassion Fatigue

• **Emotional Effects:**
  – Emotional depression
  – People are prone to sudden outbursts of anger
  – Near constant feeling of sadness – persons near the point of tears nearly all the time
  – Some are prone to cynicism, or may feel numb, or hardened to suffering
  – Some experience nightmares or flashbacks – where they relive images of suffering from the past
  – Constant swings in emotion - one minute feeling angry, the next minute numb, the next minute sad, the next minute depressed

https://www.petfinder.com/pro/for-shelters/compassion-fatigue/
Symptoms of Compassion Fatigue

• Occupational/Social:
  – Persons with these problems show the following:
    • Feel isolated from family and friends.
    • Have problems relating to co-workers or the public.
    • Snipe at others, are aggressive, sarcastic, uncooperative.
    • Normally highly productive people - now have low levels of productivity, frequently late to work and accident prone.

https://www.petfinder.com/pro/for-shelters/compassion-fatigue/
Symptoms of Compassion Fatigue

• Physical:
  – Feel exhausted or ill.
  – Develop frequent health problems.
  – Have difficulty sleeping, difficulty breathing.
  – Often start abusing alcohol, food, drugs (or do other destructive behavior) to suppress their feelings.
Symptoms of Compassion Fatigue

• Intellectual:
  – Have difficulty concentrating, difficulty making decisions.
  – Thoughts may race.

• Spiritual:
  – Feel hopeless or cynical.
“Perpetration-induced traumatic stress (PITS)”
“Perpetration-induced traumatic stress (PITS)”

• A variant of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
  – Psychological/emotional syndrome brought on by the mass destruction of healthy animals

  • Dr. Terry Whiting, “Perpetration-induced traumatic stress — A risk for veterinarians involved in the destruction of healthy animals”
The Universal Rhythm of Life

Birth: Death: Rebirth (Resurrection)
Birth:Death:Rebirth (Resurrection)

• The central theme in Christianity
  – Christ was born, crucified and on the 3rd day resurrected from death
• Consistent with cycle of the seasons
• Demonstrated by the cycle of molecules and cells within our bodies

Life is one grand rhythm of birth, death and rebirth (resurrection)
The “Universal Rhythm of Life”

Embraces the view that the miracle of death is equivalent to the miracle of birth, but

“...to honor death as a miracle equivalent to birth is one of the most challenging struggles of mankind”
Directly or indirectly, every human being – every living thing must kill to survive. *There are no options for us as individuals or as a species since...*

*“Life is fueled by Death”*
“Even those who feast upon vegetables and fruits, to avoid participating in the slaughter of animals are simply playing intellectual mind games. What right does anyone have to create a hierarchy of life forms where the killing of plants is acceptable while the killing of animals is not?”

RK Salmon

The insect eats the plant
Sometimes the plant eats the insect
The bird eats the insect
The cat eats the bird
It’s all part of nature’s magnificent plan
The Cheetah eats the Impala?
Our challenge is acceptance of the concept of “killing to survive”

Although we depend upon them for survival we shroud our killing floors in secrecy...

RK Salmon

Fostering “the Child-Like Perspective of Life”

- “Individuals are seldom forced to grapple with the pain of the necessity to kill as a requirement for their participation in life” (RK Salmon).
Coping with the Stress of Killing

• Stunners, bleeders, people who drive animals to the stun box in packing plants
  – Use 3 coping strategies:
    • A mechanical approach to the task
    • A few are sadists
      – Actually enjoy killing and inflicting pain
    • Some approach their work as a “sacred ritual”
      – A respectful approach as that applied in ritual slaughter
The Mechanical Attitude

• The mechanical attitude (most common)
  – The “Box Stapler”
    • No emotions involved in the act of killing
      – They do not talk to animals, call them names, or get angry at them.
    • The first few killings are upsetting, but then the person becomes habituated, and the killing act becomes a reflex without emotion
Most are actually pretty good workers, but their feelings about slaughtering animals lacks authenticity
The Sadist

• The sadistic person
  – Enjoys killing
    • They achieve pleasure from dominating, mistreating or otherwise causing physical harm to animals
  – Their attitude might be characterized by statements such as the following:
    • “They’re just animals and it doesn’t really hurt them.” "It is going to die in five minutes so it does not matter how I treat it."

*By devaluing the animal, the person justifies in his mind the cruel things he does to it.*
As a Sacred Ritual

• The killing of animals as a sacred ritual
  – Multiple societies have slaughter ceremonies
    • The American Indians showed respect for the deer and elk they ate
    • Serpell (1986) also describes slaughter ceremonies practiced by the ancient Greeks, Egyptians, Phoenicians, Babylonians, Hebrews, and Romans.
    • Judaism attaches great seriousness to the act of taking life.

A ritual serves to place controls on the act of killing and prevents it from getting out of control.
Grandin’s Approach

• Treats the slaughter of animals as a Sacred Ritual

  Bows her head in silence and reverence
  for the animals’ that die there

• On packing plant facilities she designs

  She inscribes the words "Stairway to Heaven" or "Valhalla"
Making the task of euthanasia less stressful?
Select people for the task of euthanasia carefully

1. Don’t make it the job of 1 or 2 people
2. Be aware of the signs of compassion fatigue
3. Make sure people are well trained for these tasks
Know the Proper Anatomical Sites
Know the Proper Firearm and Ammo

- **Handguns**: calibers .32 - .45
- **Rifles**: .22 magnum or higher caliber
  - .22 LR is not recommended for euthanasia of adult cattle
- **Shotguns**: .410 to 28 gauge (calves), 12, 16, or 20 gauge for cows
  - Number 4 or 6 birdshot was very effective at a distance of 1 to 3 meters
  - Within 4 feet – a typical shell renders a muzzle velocity of 1300 fps and a muzzle energy of 2100 ft/lb
- Avoid the use of hollow point bullets
  - They fragment and may not penetrate the skull
- Be aware that full metal jacketed bullets will penetrate and may exit causing danger for by-standers
- Buckshot, #m 4 or 6 birdshot
Know what Constitutes Unconsciousness

• Physical observable parameters (unconsciousness)
  – Animal collapses immediately
  – Animal makes no attempt right itself
  – Body and muscles become rigid immediately after the shot followed by brief tetanic spasms and eventually uncoordinated hind limb movements
  – Immediate and sustained cessation of rhythmic breathing
  – An absence of vocalization
  – An absence of eye reflexes
  – Eyelids remain open facing straight forward
  – Control of blink or corneal reflex is located in the brain stem
Know how to Confirm Death

• Cardiac arrest is confirmation
  – Heart will beat for at least 7-8 minutes following captive bolt or gunshot
    • Intravenous injection of KCl (only in unconscious animals) will cause cardiac arrest

• Other indicators of death
  – Lack of movement after 20-30 minutes
  – Rigor mortis
In Summary,
A “Good Life for Animals”

One where the animal has adequate food, water, shelter, protection from predators, compassionate care and handling, medical care as needed and a humane death when disease or injury results in uncontrollable suffering.
Timely Euthanasia

• Requires compassionate caregivers who have a clear understanding of
  – The indications for euthanasia
  – The mentational limits of animals
    • It’s painful or not, hungry or not, suffering or not
  – How to approach end of life of issues for animals with the respect and dignity it deserves
  – How to conduct the procedures and have the means to do it
Know the signs of Moral Stress and Compassion Fatigue

1. When signs arise – change the duties for the individual(s) involved
2. Seek help for them if necessary
The Biggest Challenge

• Timely euthanasia

  – No one likes (or wants) to do it

  – The decision is not always black or white

  – All are afraid of the possibility of acting too quickly
Better a week too early than a day too late.

Bernard Rollin
For Further Information:

http://vetmed.iastate.edu/HumaneEuthanasia
