

ADVICE NOTE 17

EUTHANASIA

1. The purpose of this note is to provide advice on specific problems which might arise during the euthanasia procedure.
2. Although euthanasia may be the most appropriate option for the animal, it is likely that the owner will have found making the decision difficult and may need additional reassurance both during and following the procedure.
3. As is the case with all veterinary procedures, communication is paramount and carrying out euthanasia is no exception. A brief discussion of what will take place with respect to the procedure itself, the animal's reaction at the point of administration and any peri- or post-death reactions will go some way to prepare the owner and can be very reassuring.
4. Clearly, all concerned want the euthanasia procedure to be as painless and peaceful as possible for the animal. In addition there should be the least amount of distress for the owner.
5. The timing of any discussion about the owner's wishes for the disposal of their animal's remains and any fees that may be incurred will need to be judged carefully. Once euthanasia is performed, the owner may be too upset to discuss these matters but to raise such issues in advance may seem insensitive.
6. A decision should be made with the owner as to whether they wish to be present for the euthanasia itself. The owner may believe they are 'letting their pet down' or that they are being uncaring by not being present. They may need reassurance that their choice is the right one in the circumstances.
7. Some animals may be difficult to handle, even when restrained expertly, and normally placid animals may react unexpectedly. The level of restraint should not be excessive but should be appropriate for the particular situation and be explained to the owner. An appropriate member of the practice staff should be asked to assist if necessary.
8. The owner may wish to have contact with their pet during the procedure but it should be remembered that the responsibility for the health and safety of those present lies with the veterinary surgeon. The owner may not be used to having their pet restrained and may find this difficult to accept.

9. Dependent on the species of animal, a concentrated form of pentobarbitone sodium, a drug also used as an anaesthetic, is injected directly into the blood stream of the animal. When the animal is held gently and expertly (with or without the owner's presence) this procedure should meet the above aims in most cases.
10. The majority of small animal euthanasia procedures involve injection into a vein and are carried out without incident. In some moribund animals and in very small species injection directly into the pleural or peritoneal cavity may be an alternative. Neither are all species suited to injections directly into the blood stream. In animals with poor circulation, the vein may have 'collapsed' making it difficult to penetrate. In older animals the vein may be very fragile and collapse or 'leak' during the process of injection.
11. Some of these difficulties can be anticipated. Alternative or supplementary methods; for example, administering sedatives either parenterally or by mouth may be appropriate in some circumstances. Where the veterinary surgeon considers prior sedation appropriate, the owner should be provided with an explanation and reassurance.
12. In equidae, farm or production animals, the use of drugs may be inappropriate, for example, if the carcass is for human or animal consumption. In such circumstances, the use of a licensed firearm may be the most appropriate method of euthanasia. Dart guns may also be used where an animal is unapproachable for any reason.
13. It is a veterinary surgeon's professional duty to be as prepared as possible to carry out the procedure with an appropriate method, by an appropriate route and with appropriate assistance. Nevertheless, the euthanasia procedure can be unpredictable for the following reasons:
 - a the sensory nerve supply of the skin and underlying structures may mediate pain at the injection site, although most animals show little or no response.
 - b a very few animals may react unpredictably either while the skin is being penetrated or as the injection is administered, whether the animal has been sedated or not. The animal's natural response is to withdraw the leg and therefore, there is a risk that the needle may be inadvertently withdrawn from the vein. This may give the impression that the needle has been placed incorrectly or that it has hit an alternative structure, such as bone or a major nerve, when this is not the case.
14. If the euthanasia procedure does not go according to plan, the situation may become distressing for the animal, owner, veterinary surgeon and veterinary nurse. The main objective is always to retrieve the situation quickly and to complete the euthanasia as painlessly as possible for the animal.

15. For advice on euthanasia of a healthy animal and euthanasia without the owner's consent – see Part 2D of the Guide to Professional Conduct www.rcvs.org.uk

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