

THE ETHICS OF CONVENIENCE EUTHANASIA

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When it comes to ethical-border-line euthanasia requests, we have a very important decision to make as veterinarians, but we need to ask the right questions from the start. Instead of deciding whether or not you are comfortable euthanizing that pet, the question should be “what are the alternatives for this pet.” By requesting euthanasia in the first place, the family is communicating to you that the human animal bond is broken. We can either help change the situation for them (remove the pet from their care via adoption or euthanasia), or do nothing by sending them home because “I just can’t do it.” And in my opinion, doing nothing is professional suicide; you’ve now ruined any rapport you had with that family, a small loss that does not create societal trust and respect for our profession. Helping a family, in whatever way, is far preferable than sending them home with a broken human-animal bond. Remember, medicine is not our product in the veterinary world, the human-animal bond is. Without that bond, they are not coming into our clinics. When euthanasia is requested, the family is telling us that there’s something wrong with that bond and they care enough to tell you about it instead of letting the dog or cat go on the side of the road.

So, what should be done in these extreme cases of uncomfortable euthanasia requests? Allow me to push the boundaries a bit; in my opinion, we must take responsibility for the pet in some way. As a house call hospice veterinarian, if I am at a home of a pet that I do not feel comfortable euthanizing, and with an owner that simply cannot go on, the pet will come home with me. Yes, it’s happened. And have I euthanized animals that I may not have euthanized if they were mine? Absolutely. Have I euthanized animals that other veterinarians have refused to euthanize? Absolutely. Have I euthanized animals whose owners were completely at a loss, unable to go on for many reasons, and with tears in everyone’s eyes (including mine), we knew it was a difficult but good decision? Absolutely. And when those families hug me, knowing that I did not judge them for that tough choice we made together, that I did not force an altruistic or idealistic view on them, and that I partnered with them in opting for the best alternative option for their pet, a new level of respect is earned.

Euthanasia Definitions

- Convenience euthanasia is a very subjective term. We use this phrase when euthanasia is requested for a pet that would otherwise be deemed adoptable under most circumstances and the family is unwilling to explore these options. For example, “my pet doesn’t match the decor in my home any more” (yes, I’ve heard this). Personally, I do not offer convenience euthanasia in my practice, we offer support and resources to re-home these pets.
- Non-medical euthanasia is a term I use when describing a request that is not related to the medical stability of the pet. This is a broad term that includes behavior issues (such as aggression or improper elimination in the home), in addition to emotional or lifestyle changes of the family that precludes the pet from experiencing a quality of life.
- Non-imminent medical euthanasia is a term that describes situations like the 12-year-old cat. These conditions may be manageable or even curable under the right circumstances, but for whatever reason, those circumstances do not exist. This includes the parvo puppy that may survive with intensive care, the 5-year-old intact female with a

pyometra, or the young cat with a broken leg. Without the right resources and conditions (which may be too expensive), this pet would potentially suffer greatly. Rarely will I turn down this type of euthanasia request.

- Medical euthanasia describes most of the euthanasias that occur in our clinics; a choice that is made when the quality of life of the pet is deemed unsustainable by both the family and the veterinarian.

Non-Medical & Convenience Euthanasia Rules

- Do not euthanize a pet that you do not feel comfortable euthanizing. Period. (But say “no” carefully, keeping these other rules in mind.)
- Always help the family explore alternative options and think about how those options will affect the family and the pet down the road. Remember that a shelter is the deadliest place for a pet to be. Write them down, discuss them, think about what effect those alternatives have on OTHER animals in society.
- If you are comfortable euthanizing, even if you don’t completely agree, you must help the family understand that although this is difficult for you (and them), you care greatly for the pet and the greater good.
- Do not get involved in cases if you don’t plan to help, you will do more harm to our profession by judging and berating clients that if you simply hand them a number to a different veterinarian (preferable), or at least the local shelter or rescue organization.