





7 Home Hospice

Practice ventures into “the gray area”

by Jack Sommars

“THROUGH ALL OF THE YEARS I’VE PRACTICED, I’ve always felt there was a missing piece—a gap—in veterinary care,” says Cindy Houlihan, DVM, owner of the Cat Practice in Birmingham, Mich.

“Traditionally, our profession has offered two extremes. One was to do everything we could, which almost always involved aggressive treatments or surgeries. The other extreme was euthanasia. There really wasn’t much in the middle, that gray area.

“Our hospice program has reaffirmed for me that we need that gray area,” she says. “I’ve learned that clients are interested in it, but didn’t know how to ask for this option. They didn’t know there were other things we could do in between.”

Like most veterinarians, the Cat Practice offered end-of-life care and client grief counseling for years. But they “formalized” the process last year.

Importance of consistent staff communication

“The biggest challenge was making sure all of the elements of hospice were communicated consistently by our staff,” Houlihan says. “So before we rolled this out to clients, we had to back up and formalize it with our team.”



Helping Clients Cope with Pet Loss

"I ran a grieving workshop shortly after the Cat Practice formalized its hospice program," says Camille Greenwald, PhD, a family counselor who works with Dr. Houlihan's patients on coping with their pet loss.

"Sometimes health professionals become so focused on the actual medical treatment, they ignore the emotional state of family members," she says.

"It has surprised me over the years how many people realize that losing one of their pets is much more of an emotional blow than they had initially realized.

"That's why it's helpful for veterinarians to start putting things into words for people. Encourage clients to think about the possibility that the grieving process is not going to be quick and easy.

"I remember the loss of Rocky, our own cat. It happened very suddenly. He was 17 years old and got so sick we realized we'd have to put him down. It was on a Sunday.

"So I called Dr. Houlihan, and my husband and I agreed to meet her at the Cat Practice.

"She walked in and explained what was going to happen, and we talked about how wonderful Rocky had been. Then she put him to sleep and, after she was finished, gave us some time to be alone with him.

"After she left, I turned to my husband and said, "She's very good at this, isn't she?"

He smiled through his tears and said, "Yeah, can you bring me here when it's time?"

A key step was naming Laura Kramek, LVT, to take charge of the program. She has been with the Cat Practice for more than 20 years.

"We call her our veterinary hospice nurse, and it's her job to make sure there is consistency from client to client and patient to patient," says Houlihan. "Laura is especially skilled at listening. She also is a coach, helping clients come to the decisions they need to make and then supporting them completely."

"Everybody has a preconceived notion about what they think hospice is," Kramek says. "A lot of our clients think it's actually a place, that their pets will be leaving their home, going to the hospital and being taken care of until they die.

"Our approach is exactly the opposite. Our goal is to keep them at home and to put off that visit to the hospital as long as possible."

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—LAURA KRAHEK, LVT

Postponing that "last visit"

Deborah Ketner helped postpone that "last visit" for four months by caring for her cat, Scooter, at home. Scooter had been diagnosed with inoperable cancer. Ketner had lived with her cat for 16 years, yet those final few months created an even deeper bond with her pet.

"I eventually had to start feeding Scooter by hand," says Ketner. "I didn't want her to suffer any pain during this experience, but with the help of Laura and her team, I was confident in knowing if it was going too far. I knew I was doing the best I could, and Scooter and I were evolving through this together. So it was OK.

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—CINDY HOULIHAN, DVM



“Laura was a saint,” she adds. “She was always there, always responsive and would take my calls or call me back as soon as possible. You need that at the hospice level because you’re seeing things you don’t understand. So whenever I had a question or concern, I would call or email Laura and she was right with me.”

Mary Ann Clark had been a cat owner for 35 years and was all too familiar with having an animal suffering from kidney failure, something her cat Rocky was afflicted with.

“Back then, I didn’t have the ability to give fluid treatments at home,” she says. “So I would take my cat in once a week and watch her slowly deteriorate. I felt totally helpless.

“But now, with Laura’s help, I could make a difference in Rocky’s quality of life and my own sense of well-being. There was actually something I could do that was constructive.”

Beneficial to clients, too

“So it’s not just beneficial to pets, but to their pet people, too,” Clark adds. “I felt horrible the first time I went through this kidney failure thing. But, with Rocky and the hospice, he lasted a lot longer and had a much better quality of life. It made all the difference in the world.”

The Cat Practice charges \$75 each week a patient participates in its formal hospice program. This includes medications at a reduced cost and full access to Kramek via email or phone calls.

“Clients can contact me at work, and we have also set up a separate email account I can access from home,” says

Kramek. “They don’t have my home number, and that’s something that may depend on the client. It depends on the person and their needs, and our comfort level on access knowing that somebody isn’t going to abuse it.

“We think email is sufficient because we’re also open seven days a week, and most nights we’re open until 9 p.m. So there’s not a lot of time we’re not available to them.”

“Looking back, my only regret is we didn’t do this sooner,” Houlihan says. “Once we started to embrace hospice, it has become such a wonderful thing for all of us.

“Death is hard. We all want to shy away from it. But most veterinarians will find that offering home hospice is easy, and most are already providing various elements of it already.

“Personally, I feel more comfortable because I know my clients are making an informed decision by having more information and choices available to them.

“Opening that window to the discussion has made my life easier because it’s such a difficult topic to bring up. So now when we talk about options for treatment, hospice is always one of the options, especially when we discuss euthanasia.

“I knew we had a very good group of clients, who were committed and loved their cats,” she adds. “But what I learned was they are even more committed and compassionate, and they actually embraced the hospice concept much more than I ever thought possible.” ※

Editor’s Note: For more about the Cat Practice’s Hospice and End of Life Care program, check out its website at thecatpracticepc.com.



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