

Aftercare – our last hurdle?

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What is aftercare and what does it look like now?

Aftercare in this context refers to what happens to the pet's body after death. In many veterinary settings, this has been abbreviated to the clients' wishes for the body (i.e. communal cremation, private cremation, burial etc.), but in the widest sense, it encompasses body identification, containment and handling, storage, transport and its funerary care and memorialisation.

While there are variations in New Zealand (NZ), most aftercare outside owner burial at home is similar. The pet is put into a plastic bag, sealed, and tagged and put into chiller or freezer storage until it is collected or transported to a third party for cremation. The pet's remains may be returned to the clinic for the owner to collect.

How do clients perceive aftercare?

With the exception of at home burial options, clients often have little choice but to trust the kaitiakitanga of their pet's body to the veterinary clinic staff. While there is little or no data on what clients 'think' happens to their pets' bodies, most of us in clinical practice have some shared experiences that suggest that we are not doing well enough in this area – avoiding having clients see us put the body into a plastic bag, regular questions about whether they can be sure they are getting their own pet's ashes back, and the stress and drama of a family visit to the clinic to farewell a pet that has been in the freezer already and has become unnaturally contorted.

The avoidance of bagging and tagging in front of clients and the dismay of presenting a pet's body that looks unkempt, is likely rooted in our desire for the clients not to be distressed, and our assumption, possibly based on previous experiences that this *will* cause distress. There have been well publicised pet cremation scandals overseas that may contribute to client suspicion of the pet cremation industry and the resulting query about ashes, even though there is no suggestion that any operator in NZ is in any way at fault.

How does aftercare affect clinic staff?

If our staff are aware of, and shielding clients from aftercare on an assumption that it would cause distress, does this mean that current aftercare practices may be impacting staff negatively? Could poor aftercare be contributing to dissatisfaction with the industry and compassion fatigue? Are there options to do better? What variations in staff sentiment to aftercare could be expected?

Industry guidance and research

In 2023 the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) released guidance material on pet aftercare that builds on their previous policy statements (July 2017 Handling of Companion Animal Remains). The focus of the AVMA guidance was on the dignity and respect of the body – Treat pets as you would expect your own to be treated. There have been several scandals worldwide regarding pet body disposal, and public trust in veterinarians and the aftercare providers they engaged was being eroded consistently – the emphasis now is on veterinary practices checking on and approving the aftercare providers they recommend as some liability now rests with the veterinarians' choice of procedures and aftercare providers.

The New Zealand Veterinary Association (NZVA) Euthanasia policy guidelines (2018) have statements relating to aftercare:

- Proper disposal of the body should occur; cremation or deep burial away from waterways will ensure no secondary poisoning from the chemicals left in the body will occur.
- Veterinarians should be prepared to assist with the grief shown by owners or recommend professional assistance. Veterinarians themselves should be wary of compassion fatigue.

Kathleen Cooney, a US based veterinarian and researcher has been diving into topics around euthanasia and aftercare over recent years. In Cooney *et al.* (2021), a survey of American pet owners on expectations for pet end-of-life support and after death body care revealed that 64% of owners found the use of a plastic bag ('trash bag') for their pet's body unacceptable, with only 15.6% finding it acceptable.

She has also commented publicly that in her experience, improved aftercare practice by clinics has seen reductions in compassion fatigue related to euthanasia in veterinary teams. No data has been published to this effect yet.

Where are our opportunities to do better?

The status quo for body containment persists because it meets some basic expectations – plastic bags are cheap and effective. If the clients can be separated from that experience and any resulting distress, is this good enough?

There is limited recognition of any effect on clinical teams from arguably a low bar of respect and dignity for a pet's body, and concurrently a missed opportunity to demonstrate care and respect for the deceased animal to the client. Having clients observe the next step, when done well, shows the commitment of the veterinary staff to the ongoing mana of their pet.

Experiences in doing it better

South Wairarapa Veterinary Services have transitioned to, and now exclusively use dedicated aftercare products for pets' bodies. Animals under 10kg use cardboard caskets, while larger bodies are placed in polyethylene lined non-woven bags with a plastic zipper opening. Both products include imagery that demonstrates the valued place of the pet.

Surveying the staff after 8 months has revealed strong support for continuing the practice, and almost universal agreement that it's both good for the team and a good look for the client base. Economically, the incorporation of a marked-up price into the default pet euthanasia charges has been accepted by clients and staff and there is no reduction in euthanasia services.

Additionally, clinic staff have visited the cremation facility so when clients have questions about the manākitanga that will be given to their pet, they are able to assure clients with confidence that the facility staff, systems, and processes mean their pet will be treated with respect right through until the ashes are returned to them.

Devoted home euthanasia services use the aftercare products at every home visit and have experienced a remarkable change in the tone and tenor of a visit. The addition of a dedicated aftercare body containment system has led to an increase in spontaneous funerary behaviour from the clients, adding a closure element to the visit that client feedback has shown is hugely valued.

While sustainability is still a work in progress when linked to cremation, the use of a cardboard casket, produced within New Zealand for animals up to 10kg, means a more sustainable system is being used for at least half of the bodies we cremate. The non-woven component of the bags is mostly derived from post-consumer waste, so the use of these bags results in some reduction in the use of new manufacture plastics.

So, what's next?

There are a few questions that we believe every veterinary clinic staff member should be asking, starting with the overall question of, are we doing well enough with our pet aftercare?

Consideration needs to be given to whether client expectations and needs would be met were they to witness the process from start to finish. The wellbeing of clinical staff in relation to what they are expected to see and do needs to be thought of and areas for improvement identified. And finally, the relationship with other businesses that you are entrusting your client's pets to, should be examined to ensure that confidence and trust is well placed and can be accurately and honestly passed on to clients.

What do you think? Are you doing enough?

Reference

Cooney KA *et al.* Pet owners' expectations for pet end-of-life support and after-death body care: Exploration and practical applications. *Topics in Companion Animal Medicine* 43: 100503, 2021

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