DECIDING WHEN IT’S TIME

This is a question that has no simple answer, though it is one that I try to answer on a regular basis. So many factors influence the decision for each family, that there is no one size fits all. The discussion is hard to begin, and the decision is gut wrenching to finalize. But when a family is able to see euthanasia as a final and heartfelt gift to their pet, they can hopefully feel a bit of peace.

My job is not to make the decision, but to provide a family assistance in reaching it. I can help a family understand the medical considerations and expectations for their pet, and how they may affect the quality of her life, and of her humans’ lives. The timing of these events is sometimes predictable and expected. Other times, it is less so. However, what is almost always subjective is the timing of euthanasia. It can vary from hours or days to months. It can depend on what is best for the individual pet and their family. Some will want to delay the decision as they work to come to terms with the decline of their pet. For others, the concern that the pet not experience any unnecessary suffering at all.

On that note, never doubt this: You know your baby better than anyone!

But what factors should be considered when you are evaluating your pet’s situation? There must surely be some tangibles to look at!

Some things to consider, when trying to figure out your pet’s quality of life:

PAIN AND ANXIETY

Perhaps the first thing we think of when we think about or sick or elderly pet is pain. Are they hurting? It is certainly one of the most important things I talk about during hospice visits and euthanasia consultations. Of course, none of us wants our pet to hurt. But knowing if they are can be difficult. Our dogs and cats are not emotionally attached to their pain like we humans are. They don’t worry about their diagnosis, or their future like we do. So while they do not hide their pain, they do not react to it as we might expect.

What is perhaps worse for pets is anxiety. Ever see the look you dog gives you right before you go into the vet’s office? How about at an unappreciated bath time? He seemed to feel terrible! That is anxiety. Now think about how he responded the last time he had a scrape or strained muscle or bite. Much less dramatic, usually. Anxiety is difficult for them.

For example, a pet with end stage arthritis will often begin pacing, panting, whining and/or crying. This is usually because of the anxiety they feel because of their pain. Hormones and other factors can make this worse at night. Their body has let them know that they are no longer high ranking in the social structure, so if they lie down to rest, someone else may make a meal of them. While this isn’t a real threat for our domestic pets, it is an instinct that cannot be overridden. While anti-anxiety medicine can sometimes help, it is important to remember that pets that have reached this stage are usually near the end.

WAITING TOO LONG…

We never want to give up quality days with our fur baby. We don’t want to give up without giving it a good fight. But how will things look with the benefit of hindsight? Many families regret waiting till very late in the disease process, and feel guilty for having put their pet through many trips to the vet and procedures that did little to help improve their quality of life.

Sometimes the regret comes from the pet passing away naturally, in a difficult, painful or scary event, or passing away alone.

If a family has been through the process before, they are more likely to make the decision earlier in the decline instead of near the end.

I can tell you more, as a pet owner, if you want to know. Just ask me about Hannah and Carrie.

NATURAL DEATH?

Of course, this is the way things have gone in nature forever. And while some pets pass peacefully in their sleep, just like humans, this is rare. If this is the route a family chooses, I will provide as much information as possible regarding how the natural death might progress, how long it might take and what they might see. It can be difficult to watch, and many people feel helpless because they can do nothing to explain to their pet what is happening or why they are suffering.

A natural death is just that- natural. If your pet happens to pass naturally, it is not something bad, and it is not something you should feel guilty about. Sometimes, Nature has plans contrary to our own.

WEIGHING YOUR OPTIONS CAREFULLY

It is understandable that you want to wait until the last minute possible to make the decision to tell your baby goodbye. But by putting the decision off, you are much more likely to face an emergency situation that is stressful and sufferable for your pet.

If you wish for your pet a peaceful, loving, in home experience, surrounded by family and in a comfortable and familiar place, you may need to make the decision a little sooner than you want.

The decision should be about preventing suffering from occurring, rather than waiting until after suffering has occurred.

Perhaps, it is about trading their pain for yours. It is a selfless trade, that when made is a true gift of love.