



VETERINARY PRACTITIONERS BOARD
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

End of life veterinary services

A range of veterinary services is used to support an animal and its owner at the end of the animal's life. End of life veterinary services impact individuals, industry and the wider community. A veterinary practitioner's training places them in a privileged position to advise and provide treatments to relieve an animal's distress and suffering when there is little likelihood it will recover its previous quality of life.

Most often in this situation, a veterinary practitioner, with the owner's consent, will administer controlled medications or another method to euthanise the animal and induce a death which is as stress-free and painless as possible.

Compassionate communication about end of life is seen as an ethical responsibility and a core clinical skill and is integral to the veterinary-client-patient relationship (VCPR). End of life care frequently requires a veterinary practitioner and an owner to make decisions of significant consequence. The owner's informed decision-making on end-of-life clinical management and treatment options relies on open sharing of relevant information.

A person who does or omits to do an act with the result that unreasonable pain or suffering is caused or is likely to be caused to an animal commits an act of cruelty upon that animal (Section 5 of the [Prevention of Cruelty to Animals \(POCTA\) Act 1979](#)).

Under section 86 of the ACT [Animal Welfare Act 1992](#), a veterinary practitioner may euthanise an animal:

- (1) If, in the opinion of a veterinary practitioner -
 - (a) an animal is so severely injured, so diseased or in such a physical condition that it is cruel to keep it alive; and
 - (b) the animal is not about to be destroyed, or is about to be destroyed in a manner that will inflict unnecessary pain upon the animal;the veterinary practitioner may--
 - (c) seize the animal; and
 - (d) give assistance to the animal; and
 - (e) remove the animal to such place as the veterinary practitioner thinks fit; and
 - (f) destroy the animal, or cause it to be destroyed, in a manner that causes it to die quickly and without unnecessary pain.

The reasonable expenses incurred by a veterinary practitioner in the exercise of a power conferred by subsection (1) in relation to an animal may be recovered from the owner of the animal as a debt in a court.

This privilege applies whether the animal is owned, the owner is not known, or the animal is a non-domesticated animal presented by a member of the public in an emergency situation. This privilege does not require owner consent. However, when a veterinary practitioner determines that such euthanasia is necessary, the Board recommends the veterinary practitioner discusses their plan with a professional peer. When acting under this authority, and in the situation where the owner is not present, the veterinary practitioner should make all reasonable attempts to contact the owner; the time spent doing this should be balanced against not prolonging the suffering of the animal unnecessarily. The veterinary practitioner should document their efforts to contact the owner in their clinical records.

A veterinary practitioner may have an ethical objection to euthanasia; for example, if they believe that other practical options exist that will satisfactorily alleviate an animal's distress, disease or disability. This ethical objection should be disclosed to the owner and other options presented, which may include referral to another veterinary practitioner or the animal's documented surrender or rehoming.

A veterinary practitioner considers a range of factors in proposing options for managing an animal's end of life and in planning their communication with the owner of the animal. At times, a veterinary practitioner may need to reconcile the owner's preference as to whether to accept end of life veterinary services with a potential impact on the public wellbeing and safety. Such factors may include:

1. whether the animal is suffering from a notifiable disease and the possible exposure of other animals to such a disease
2. whether the animal is a declared pest species or poses a biosecurity or other community threat
3. rules for management of the animal under a racing or other code, and
4. requirements or processes which may need to be fulfilled after the animal's death, such as necropsy or responding to insurance claims.

Communication between an owner and a veterinary practitioner after the unexplained or unexpected death of an animal requires collaboration to resolve any issues rather than a focus on perceived shortcomings in the animal's treatment or care.

A veterinary practitioner must take reasonable steps to satisfy themselves that an individual requesting euthanasia for an animal has the authority to do so. If the individual is not the owner, they should provide evidence to a veterinary practitioner that the owner has given them authority for end of life decision-making. Authority to make a decision about end of life veterinary services is not dependent on who is responsible for meeting the costs of end of life veterinary services.

Professional conduct under this policy is demonstrated by the following:

- A veterinary practitioner may euthanise an animal when it is distressed, diseased or disabled to such an extent that the animal's condition cannot be satisfactorily relieved by veterinary care.

- A veterinary practitioner offers euthanasia to an owner as an option to manage an animal's distress, disease or disability when appropriate.
- A veterinary practitioner supports an owner with relevant information to assist with their decision-making in relation to end of life veterinary services, including information on the reasons for euthanasia, the method of euthanasia, processes to determine the cause of an unexpected death (where relevant) and disposal of the animal's remains.
- Where a veterinary practitioner has an ethical objection to euthanising an animal, the veterinary practitioner must disclose their objection to the owner and offer the owner a referral to another veterinary practitioner.
- In the event of an unexplained or unexpected death of an animal under their care, a veterinary practitioner provides an owner with information on arranging a necropsy, including any anticipated limitations to necropsy results. A veterinary practitioner refers an owner to another veterinary practitioner to carry out a necropsy, unless it is not possible or practical to do so and the owner provides informed consent.