

End-of-Life Care and the Animal

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Abstract

As veterinary palliative care evolves over the next decade, I hope to see a strong emphasis on the individual patient maintained. So far, the nascent field has focused primarily on the bereaved family and the burnt-out and compassion-fatigued veterinary team. I've attended professional conferences where the content was heavily weighted toward dealing with depressed families, memorialising deceased animals, performing euthanasia, and teaching veterinarians and nurse's self-care skills, with few to no lectures on how to identify behavioural signs of distress or better understand the emotional lives of animal patients. The literature on pet loss and bereavement is many times larger and more robust than the literature on assessing quality of life.

Keywords: Veterinary • Fatigue • Animal • Palliative

Introduction

Although research into nonhuman animal pain and personality is still in its early stages, preliminary findings are intriguing. Ijichi and colleagues discovered preliminary evidence in 2014 that behavioural indicators of pain in horses may not accurately indicate the level of tissue damage and that horses' behavioural response to pain varied according to personality. In 2018, Lush and Ijichi conducted a similar study in dogs, using the Monas Canine Personality Questionnaire-Revised to assess personality and the Glasgow Composite Measure Pain Scale to assess pain. "Noticeable individual variation in both behavioural and physiologic responses to pain triggered by the same procedure," they discovered [1].

It has long been assumed that observable signs of pain, such as those measured in pain scales such as the Colorado State University chronic and acute scales for dogs and cats, are reliable indicators not only of the presence of pain but also of its severity. These behaviour-based scales are used to determine whether or not analgesic drugs are effective and at what dosage. The welfare implications of incorrect pain assessments are obvious: if pain is underestimated, it may not be treated effectively; if pain is overestimated, excessive analgesic dosing may be used, resulting in adverse effects and possibly premature euthanasia [2].

Literature Review

Loneliness is only one type of social pain experienced by companion animals, but it is likely one of the most common forms of suffering in dogs, cats, and other pets. Loneliness may be an unexpected comorbidity in animals with chronic disease, as well as in animals dying. Loneliness may increase sensitivity to pain and possibly exacerbate distress associated with other conditions. Illness can aggravate loneliness and vice versa; on the other hand, social connectedness can improve both mental and physical health. Social support can significantly reduce stress [3,4].

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Discussion

Social behaviour and inflammatory processes are powerful regulators: sickness causes characteristic changes in social behaviour, or "sickness behaviours," as Eisenberg and colleagues term them. Inflammation increases neural sensitivity to negative social experiences, which increases proinflammatory activity in response to social stressors. People who are lonely have increased inflammatory activity. Although Eisenberg and colleagues write about human behaviour, much of the research on which they base their case was done using animal models, and it can be assumed that loneliness and social isolation in other social mammals may similarly increase inflammatory response and thus pain sensitivity [5-7].

Conclusion

Treating the animal patient as if it were a person entails honing the ability to see the patient as clearly as possible. To help bring the patient into, veterinary end-of-life care can engage with the science of animal emotion and cognition. The term patient comes from the Latin word *pati*, which means "one who suffers." Addressing suffering and providing effective support during the final months, weeks, days, and moments of each animal's life will be best positioned by attending as carefully as possible to the subjective experiences of each individual animal, to which each animal is, and to what he or she is feeling.

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Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest by author.

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