

First International Pet Hospice Symposium: Drawing the Circle of Care



The Nikki Hospice Foundation for Pets

400 New Bedford Drive, Vallejo, CA 94591 U.S.A.
Phone: 707-557-8595 ~ Fax: 707-557-5555
info@PetHospice.org ~ PetHospice.org

Assisi International Animal Institute, Inc.

P.O. Box 10166, Oakland, CA 94610 U.S.A.
Phone: 510-532-5800 ~ Fax: 510-434-9493
info@AssisiAnimals.org ~ AssisiAnimals.org



On March 28-30, 2008, the first International Pet Hospice Symposium took place at the School of Veterinary Medicine at the University of California (Davis). Organized by the Nikki Hospice Foundation for Pets (NHFP) and Assisi International Animal Institute, the Symposium brought together veterinary professionals, human hospice providers, counselors, animal communicators, business people, artists, and many breeds of lay animal lovers.

One thing was clear: Socially, our companion animals have arrived. They have entered the inner circle once reserved for human family members. Beneath that clarity is a struggle to move through some of the complex issues – personal and societal, technical and spiritual – that arise surrounding a companion animal's illness or death.

The Nikki Hospice Foundation for Pets grew out of Dr. Kathryn Marocchino's experience surrounding the decline of her cat Nikki. Dr. Marocchino was stunned that veterinarians on the case offered only two options to her, her husband, and their beloved Nikki: aggressive treatment or euthanasia. As a Kaiser Foundation Hospital hospice volunteer, she knew there was a better way.

Here are some of the most provocative questions raised during the weekend:

By Barbara Saunders

Question 1: How is the role of the veterinarian changing as human-companion animal relationships evolve?

From Mechanic to Pediatrician

Until about fifty years ago, veterinarians most commonly maintained the condition of working animals whose status derived from their monetary value and from their ability to perform as equipment. Small animal veterinarians today treat best friends who share their families' beds.

From Advocate for Animals to Counselor in a Multi-Being Family System

Most veterinarians were trained to regard euthanasia as the only compassionate and humane response to an animal who is medically suffering, not exclusively when an illness is terminal, but also where quality of life or dignity (as we human beings perceive it) is compromised. With the advent of increasingly sophisticated pain management tools and new attitudes about supporting pets with special needs or disabilities, multiplying layers of values, moral principles, and practical concerns have entered the veterinarian's consulting room.

From Authority Figure to Partner

The long-standing stature of medical professionals as authority figures has shifted. Assertive patients research medical information on the Internet and challenge

their doctors (whether MDs or DVMs). Some patients turn to alternative (and unregulated) practitioners for advice and care that varies in quality. Clients expect assistance in digesting the input of people ranging from animal communicators to nutritionists to product manufacturers.

Implications for Veterinary Professional Self-Care

Non-veterinarians may never have considered the toll that animal suffering and euthanasia takes on doctors, people who have devoted their lives to the care of animals and who may end hundreds of animals' lives over the course of a career. Veterinarians, like medical providers to humans, have no choice but to erect protective emotional boundaries that enable them to provide calm and supportive service to their clients and patients. The firm conviction that euthanasia is often the most humane course option for a terminally ill pet has been one of those boundaries. Though there have always been veterinarians who provide a continuum of curative and palliative solutions, articulating and naming hospice forces veterinarians to revisit a painful subject.

Question 2: What is the nature of the human-animal bond?

Language like “pet parent” and “companion animal” and “guardian” aside, psychology’s understanding of what animals mean in our lives is at the stage of rough analogy. Companion animals can be our mirrors and also representatives of “nature.” Service animals are both dependents and caregivers. Working animals are both agents and instruments. Legally, animals are property – a status which oncologist Dr. Alice Villalobos adamantly insists preserves the rightful authority owners have over pets’ care. At the same time, they are beings in their own right, as animal communicator Dr. Jeri Ryan emphasizes.

Theories of parent-child attachment are part of the foundational undergraduate psychology curriculum. Graduate students also learn about theories of romantic attachment. Dr. Richard Timmins put forward the case that neither model is adequate to the task of describing the human-animal bond. There is no model.

Question 3: Are our cultural norms about illness, death, and dying serving us?

In her keynote address, Dr. Marocchino made a pronouncement that is both obvious and radical: “Death is not a medical event.” Human physicians’ education steeped them in a mindset that labeled death a personal failure, and institutional structures reinforced that perspective. The nurses, social workers, educators, clergy, dying people, and family members who pioneered the hospice movement asserted otherwise.

Dr. Ella Bittel, a holistic veterinarian trained in Germany, urges us to consider how the convention of pet euthanasia has bolstered a kind of escapism from our own fears of mortality or of the dying process itself. She shared her own experience that, despite training in both conventional and alternative medicine, she felt at a loss when confronted with the death of her beloved dog Momo.

What do our relationships with our human companions teach us about how to live?

Weeks after the Symposium, I spoke with Dr. Marc Bekoff, author of multiple books on ethics in human-animal relationships and co-founder (with Jane Goodall) of Ethologists for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. Bekoff, who trains people and animals to deliver animal-assisted therapy in human hospice, had never heard of hospice for pets – even though he had already carried it out.

Bekoff’s advice: “[Hospice should be] the same way they make it for humans ... [companion animals are] part of the family... we owe them the very, very best treatment we can give them. We can’t be driven by economics or time.”

“Use your common sense,” he adds. “Do not abandon them at the time in life when they really need it.”

Dr. Bekoff’s Malamute, Inuk, got yogurt and cookies and ice cream during his old age. His Jethro got acupuncture and weekly massage for the last four months of his life. The lessons in love and trust Bekoff learned from caring for his dogs helped him through his parents’ deaths. Ultimately, we animals are all in the same predicament.

“In some ways,” he said, “we’re all doing hospice.”

*Barbara Saunders is a writer with
Pets Unlimited in San Francisco.*

