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Economic Euthanasia: The Role of the Veterinary Professional

Alfred Lord Tennyson said, “Tis better to have loved and lost than to have never loved at all.” Although it is difficult to agree with this statement, especially for somebody who has recently dealt with personal loss such as a family member or a pet, these wise words are very true and can apply to anybody. One of the most difficult aspects of veterinary medicine is euthanasia for both veterinary professionals as well as pet owners because of the affection associated with the pet. While euthanasia is sometimes the very best thing that can be done for an animal, it places so much suffering on the shoulders of veterinary staff and owners in these situations, sometimes leaving both wondering if it’s even worth it. Even in these situations, the knowledge that all options were considered before euthanasia and that the patient is no longer in pain is often a relief. But sadly, this is not always the case. Euthanasia is not always left to the very last resort. Economic euthanasia is when the decision of the euthanasia of an animal is elected based primarily or heavily on avoiding the high expense of treatment. ¹ This type of euthanasia takes one of the biggest tolls on veterinary professionals. In this paper, I intend to identify the factors of economic euthanasia and its effects on veterinary professionals as well as on pet owners. I will also elaborate on how to deal with it as veterinary professionals, how to deal with clients in this situation and discuss the various options available to avoid this tragedy.

Unfortunately, economic euthanasia is more common than most people would think. Not only is the number of economic euthanasias already high, it is ever increasing. ⁵ According to an owner of a veterinary clinic in Virginia, about two-thirds of the pets euthanized are for economic reasons. Montgomery County Animal Resource Center in Dayton, Ohio, has seen an increase of

about 10% to 12% of people wanting to euthanize their pets because of lacking the financial means with which to pay for their treatments. ⁵ So why do we have that increase in economic euthanasia?

One common reason, and a common complaint of veterinary care in general, is the expense. ¹ With technological advances in diagnostic tests and treatments available in more veterinary clinics the vet bill can become overwhelming. Many people see the price and think that they are being overcharged, that the clinic is only after their money, and that they are being cheated. What they do not realize is how much the clinic has invested in purchasing, maintaining and running the technology used for treating the patient. ¹ Often when the owner gets a bad prognosis where the treatment is the only option of the animal living, the expense is either more than they can afford or more than they are willing to pay so the owner elects for euthanasia. Or, and this one is much more frustrating for the veterinary staff, when the owner cannot afford or does not want to pay for the diagnostic tests and elects for euthanasia instead, when the problem could have been a relatively simple fix. Similar to this reason, often times the owner does not bring their pet in for a long time and as a result the problem is so big when the patient is examined that the treatment is more expensive than say a week ago. This fear of the diagnosis and the cost of treatment is a very common cause that leads to economic euthanasia. ⁵

Another reason is poor preventive measures. For example, heartworms are easily spread and are expensive to treat especially when they're progressive. Yet there are many preventative medications available at very reasonable and affordable prices. Lack of preventatives can lead to serious diseases that can be fatal if not treated and an expensive veterinary bill so, like before, many owners elect for euthanasia. The same could happen with ticks, fleas or other internal parasites. Yet all of those problems and the grief suffered by the owner and the veterinary staff

could be avoided with good preventatives. Other times accidents just happen like getting hit by a car, getting into something toxic, or an intestinal obstruction and there isn't much that that owner could do to prevent it at all.

Everybody in the veterinary profession knows the emotional stress that comes with the job. Euthanasia in general is a major cause of this stress. The continuous cycle of loving and losing patients takes a heavy toll on us. The bond naturally made between a veterinary staff member and the patients is unavoidable and frankly, most (if not all) veterinary professionals love that very personal bond they share with their patients. Although it is a beautiful thing, it makes it so much more difficult later when that patient dies. ⁴ Economic euthanasias are so much harder emotionally for veterinary professionals because of this bond. With the fact that economic euthanasia can almost always be avoided, it adds on extra disappointment that more wasn't done when it could have if it weren't for financial restrictions. And with that disappointment comes the guilt of questioning "what could I have done?" It becomes so much easier to feel anger or frustration toward the situation or the owner that a perfectly treatable animal was euthanized. ⁴ In cases like this it is important to keep these emotions under control in front of the client. If unable to communicate or behave professionally with the client or if the situation is too much to bear emotionally, it would be best to have somebody else take over with the procedure.

Another effect of economic euthanasia on a clinic that is sometimes overlooked is economic impact. When a patient that could have been treated and recovered well is instead euthanized, the revenue that could have come with the treatment is lost entirely. Not only is revenue lost, sometimes clients can no longer emotionally withstand returning to the clinic where their pet died. This results in further loss of revenue that could have come from other pets the client may later have.

All of these feelings and emotional stress happening in clinic so often make compassion fatigue and burning out common issues in the veterinary medical field. This makes healthy coping mechanisms imperative for all veterinary professionals. ⁴ One important measure that can be implemented into regular practice is having debriefing meetings together as staff. This allows the opportunity for the employees to discuss their views and feelings on the situation in a group that can both provide insight and understanding from others who have also experienced the same kind of situation. This helps the individuals feel less isolated in their pain. While these debriefings can be successful without the presence of a professional, the input of a mental health professional can be even more helpful especially if they are familiar with veterinary-related issues. Individual counseling can also help with getting through the grieving process associated with an especially difficult euthanasia. ⁴

Just like euthanasia affects veterinary professionals, it also affects the owner greatly. As with veterinary professionals, a regular euthanasia is less upsetting for an owner than an economic euthanasia usually is. The same grief, disappointment and anger is found in the thoughts and emotions of the owner except that the guilt present is often tenfold. Owners go through the same grieving process with stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. ² But what makes dealing with economic euthanasia worse is that the guilt and anger is not only doubled but often it is directed at themselves when they know that they were unable to afford a treatment that likely would have given their pet more time and a happy life. Sometimes this makes it easier for clients to be angry and lash out against the veterinary staff and while this is entirely inappropriate, it is important for veterinary professionals to recognize the feelings behind this behavior in order to address the situation correctly.

This leads to the main question: what is our role as veterinary professionals in handling this? Listening is probably the single most important way we can help a client through the grieving stages and through the extra guilt they face afterward. ² Just like with a regular euthanasia, it is sometimes appropriate to reaffirm the client that they did all that they could have done for their pet. Losing a pet is sometimes seen as trivial by other people, so it is important that we empathize with the client showing genuine compassion.

Like with many things, prevention is better than treatment. Client education is of the essence when it comes to possibly preventing economic euthanasia. ¹ Educating clients on preventative medications for heartworms, ticks, fleas, and internal parasites can go a long way. Taking the time to educate clients with new pets on the cost of maintaining their pet, projected medical plans and their costs for illnesses and issues related to the pets' breed is also helpful. ¹ This helps inform the owner of what financial preparations would be wise to make for what could happen. Encouraging the owners to enroll their pets in annual wellness plans including annual or biannual exams is an excellent way to check and maintain the health of the animal and alleviate the client's concerns. ³

Preparing for possible health issues could include informing clients of the options available to them. There are various charities and grants given based on specific breeds, illnesses or geographic locations. Third-party payment plans can spread out the expense into manageable installments. A clever and sometimes overlooked option that can prepare the owner for the expense while also spreading out the bill into smaller installments is having a separate credit card dedicated entirely to pet healthcare. This can not only help with paying for emergencies and even annual exams and preventative medications, it also increases credit scores if properly used.

Another option is to set aside money in an account working with a regular budget to save up for emergencies. ¹

Pet insurance is available with many agencies offering several policies and can be very helpful in these situations. ³ There are numerous companies that offer coverage for pets from dogs and cats, to even reptiles and birds. Pet insurance can not only help with expensive treatments for illnesses such as cancer or critical surgeries such as fixing a torn cruciate ligament, some policies even offer wellness coverage for things like annual exams, treatments for ticks and fleas and even vaccinations. In 2014, the average accident and illness coverage for dogs was \$473, and for cats it was \$285. For just accident coverage it was \$158 for dogs and \$132 for cats. ⁶ Accident coverage usually comes with the basic policy and would cover common veterinary injuries like getting hit by a car and other unforeseen emergencies. Illness coverage provides the means for affording treatments for cancer and other expensive conditions. Policies and prices vary for pets based on age, breed, health and veterinary costs. Considering just how easily something harmful can happen to a pet, having health insurance is definitely a fantastic option when dealing with a veterinary emergency and in maintaining an owner's peace of mind.

Sadly, economic euthanasia is ultimately the decision of the client based on their financial capabilities, but with proper client education we can help prepare our clients to avoid this tragedy. It is the responsibility of pet owners to educate themselves before getting into the responsibility of caring for a pet. Likewise, it is our responsibility as veterinary professionals to provide information to clients on the issue. Whether clients accept the advice or not, we should prepare ourselves for encountering economic euthanasia by having good coping mechanisms and looking out for each other. With proper planning, there are many alternatives to being forced into

the situation of economic euthanasia and avoiding the emotional stress it causes the owner and veterinary staff.

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