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Pet Loss Support Hotline Established at the College of Veterinary Medicine

Jeanne Budgin[†]

Human adaptations to a modern, mobile society have resulted in companion animals serving as children, best friends, and partners to single, divorced, and widowed adults. In addition, animals provide individuals with eyes, ears, protection, and friendship.¹ It is not surprising that pet owners often compare veterinarians to pediatricians.² Both pediatricians and veterinarians treat the most vulnerable and dependent members of the family, and clients believe health care providers to be sensitive, compassionate, and caring individuals. With these expectations in mind, the veterinarian's response to pet loss has a major influence on client relations and the financial success of the veterinary practice.

With forty percent of clients changing veterinarians because of dissatisfaction with the circumstances surrounding the death or euthanasia of their pets and fifteen percent of former pet owners stating that they will not adopt a new dog or cat in the future as "the death of a pet is too difficult psychologically," the importance of pet loss issues to veterinary medicine becomes evident.³

Veterinarians are confronted with animal loss on a daily basis as they diagnose, treat, and euthanize companion animals. The knowledge of how to intervene in crises, facilitate decisions, prepare for euthanasia, and normalize the grief process is not addressed in the veterinary school curriculum and consequently veterinarians are not prepared to handle these issues in practice.

Through the establishment of the ISU Pet Loss Support Hotline, veterinary medical students can experience an aspect of human attachment to animals that they do not typically see in the clinics, and they generally will not see in practice. They benefit both personally and as future veterinarians

by gaining an understanding of the human-animal bond, bereavement issues, and the normal grief process.

Development of the ISU Pet Loss Support Hotline

The establishment of the Pet Loss Support Hotline at Iowa State University is a student-driven project of the College of Veterinary Medicine and the IAMS Company. Jeanne Budgin, VM2, the program coordinator, modeled the hotline after similar successful programs at other colleges of veterinary medicine. Dr. Loren A. Will of Veterinary Extension is serving as the advisor. The project was recently dedicated in memory of Krista Rankin, the former IAMS student representative who died tragically during the fall of 1996. The project's goals include: a) offering counseling and support to individuals who call the hotline grieving the loss of an animal or are making the decision about euthanasia of a companion animal, b) aiding students in effective communication and client counseling with respect to euthanasia decisions and pet death, and c) furthering the compassionate nature of the veterinary school and its "Gentle Doctor" persona. The ISU Pet Loss Support Hotline, an 888 call-in number, operational in the late spring of 1997, will be available 24 hours a day via an answering service with students returning calls and answering phones from 6:00-9:00 PM seven days a week during the academic year and three days a week during the summer months. Having completed a six hour training session, students will counsel those grieving the loss of their companions and offer information about euthanasia, memorialization, new pets, and other issues related to pet loss and bereavement. Following each call, the hotline volunteer will draft a letter to the caller. The student can mention further thoughts about the caller's situation and suggest appropriate additional reading material.

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For a donation, brochures will be made available to veterinarians throughout the United States. The program has already received much media and press attention and both the IVMA and extension newsletters have agreed to promote the hotline service. Press releases will be provided to veterinary journals and special interest publications. An internet site has been established, compliments of Mark Troxel, VM2, which is available through the ISU College of Veterinary Medicine web server (<http://www.vetmed.iastate.edu/support>).

Future financial support will be provided in part by the IAMS Company in addition to tax deductible public contributions.

Conclusion

The challenges involved in handling euthanasia and pet loss issues are equal or greater than those requiring technical skills, for there is no generally accepted protocol for euthanasia, and clients are most attentive and have the highest expectations when the pet is faced with death.⁴

Veterinarians who have received the knowledge and skill to act as pet loss counselors feel comfortable with client emotions and comfortable with their own personal responses to loss. Educating future veterinarians about the strength of the human animal bond, broken bonds, the grief process,

and pet loss counseling can help change negative experiences into meaningful ones for both pet owner and veterinarian.

Pet loss counseling pays off for veterinary professionals with lowered stress levels and higher commitments to work. Those who thoughtfully address the needs of clients during the companion animal's unexpected death, extreme illness, or euthanasia, and who are therefore perceived as compassionate, are most likely to fare well in building a strong, rewarding, and trusting relationship with clients resulting in a successful practice based on client trust and referral. ♦

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IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY PET LOSS SUPPORT HOTLINE 1-888-ISU-PLSH (1-888-478-7574)



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Hours of Operation: 6:00-9:00 PM CST seven days a week (September-April)
6:00-9:00 PM CST Monday, Wednesday, Friday (May-August)
Callers may leave a message any time.

Staffed by veterinary students and community members trained in grief counseling.

A non-profit organization funded by the IAMS Company and private donations. Brochures and sympathy card enclosures available. Donations appreciated to cover cost.

Visit our web page: <http://www.vetmed.iastate.edu/support>