



## THE FINAL GIFT

Euthanasia. The subject is almost taboo to talk about and sometimes controversial, but I think it is important to be educated about your options prior to you having to make them under duress. I have been involved in more pet euthanasias than I care to think about. I have worked for 10 years in veterinary offices as a tech, assisting the doctor, the pet and the family through difficult times. As a trainer, there have been a few times that I have had to recommend euthanasia for the safety of human life. Recently, I had to make the decision to euthanize my own beloved pet, Pete, who was slowly dying of lymphoma. The decision and the act of euthanasia is never easy – and shouldn't be.

The decision to end the life of a pet is heart wrenching. There are so many conflicting thoughts and emotions from the time that you start to wonder if you will need to make the decision at some point until the moment that your pet falls asleep for the last time either in your arms or in the arms of a caring technician. The majority of people who I have guided through this process have had many questions about what is going to happen during the actual euthanasia as well as questioning if they are doing the right thing.

Euthanasia is something we don't want to think about or know about until we are put into the position of *having* to think about it. When that time comes, we are in such an emotional state, it is hard to understand or process what you are deciding and what is happening around you.

Euthanasia is easy to describe as a scientific medical procedure – it is the human (or humane) part that is extremely complex. Medically speaking, the pet is injected with an overdose of a barbiturate (pentobarbitone) that enters the blood stream causing loss of consciousness and pain sensation and then causing death by stopping the heart. The drug works quickly, painlessly and effectively if given in the correct dosage.

I would be surprised if any 2 veterinarians had the exact same opinion on when, why and how to provide this service. It is and should be a difficult and emotional procedure to counsel for and to perform. I have worked for veterinarians who refuse to euthanize any physically healthy pet that has not aggressively injured a human. I have worked for vets who believe that it is the owner's right to decide to euthanize their pet for any reason and for vets whose policy lies anywhere between these two guiding principles.

I have been asked many questions by pet owners – when is it the right time? Am I making the right decision? Should I euthanize? There is no right or wrong answer to these questions. This is such a highly personal decision with moral and ethical components to it that you have to do what your heart leads you to do. I can tell you that in the high majority of cases, the human just knew. Whether the pet gives you a look that says "I'm ready" or you just feel in your heart that your pet is suffering too much, the

decision often becomes easier in a single moment. Certainly, if your pet stops eating, drinking and eliminating, making the decision is a little easier. That is not to say that afterwards, there are not second doubts, guilt and recriminations – there almost always are – we are human, after all.

I want to explain the different options available to you to make the process easier on your pet and hopefully easier on your mind. First, you can be present during the procedure or choose not to – no right or wrong, no judgments. You can choose to have your pet in your arms and/or with the family around him so he is surrounded by what is familiar to him. You can choose to say goodbye to your pet when you hand him over to the vet staff and not be present during the process.

If your pet is nervous at the vet's office, you can ask that he be lightly sedated prior to the procedure. Since the injection is given in the vein and it is sometimes difficult to find a good vein on an old, sick or injured pet, you can ask that an I.V. catheter be placed prior to the actual injection. If your pet is still eating, you can bring a wonderful last treat for them – chocolate cake, steak or anything you want to give him. You can have it done at home or at the vet's office.

You can take your pet's remains home with you, have a service bury him in a congregate grave, you can bury your pet in a pet cemetery like Wayside Waifs, have him cremated with or without the ashes being returned to you. You can even attend the cremation if you want to be sure the pet's ashes you are receiving back are the correct ones.

You don't have to wait until it is an emotional decision. Most of us have (or we should have) a living will that tells our loved ones what we would like done medically if we can no longer make that decision. You can alert your veterinarian to what your wishes would be for your pet ahead of time so they can mark your chart and you don't have to worry about all the small details while you are in emotional upheaval. This decision is highly personal and you have the right to make choices based on your beliefs and feelings.

Euthanasia takes a toll on everyone involved. I have worked with and known a lot of veterinarians and veterinary staff and have never met one that took euthanasia lightly, it affects all of them. I have seen vets and staff (including myself) cry before the owner and pet arrive, during the procedure and after the long day is over.

Afterwards, it is important to let yourself grieve. There are several grief counseling services such as The Association for Pet Loss and Bereavement ([aplb.org](http://aplb.org)) and many pet loss forums on the internet. Help and support is there if you need it – there is no right way or wrong way to grieve.

When it came time for me to make the decision about Pete, all of the intellectual knowledge and past experience I have had were nowhere to be found. The time leading up to making the decision was excruciating, my emotions were all over the place. I know, however that all of the love and companionship he gave me during his short life

needed to be repaid. I had given him a lot of gifts during his 12 years with me – balls, treats, toys, walks and love, but the final and most unselfish gift I gave him was not letting him suffer and be in pain any longer. Now, as I wipe my tears away, let me just say – love your pet with all your heart and know that whatever decisions you make for your pet in the end is right for you and for your beloved pet.

Gentle Paws Dog Training  
Patty Homer, CPDT-KA, ABCDT  
[pattythepuppypro@gmail.com](mailto:pattythepuppypro@gmail.com)  
206-370-2728  
[gentlepawsdogtraining.com](http://gentlepawsdogtraining.com)