

What Do Pet Owners Want When It Comes to End-of-Life (EOL) Support and After-Death Body Care For Their Pets?

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End-of-life (EOL) discussions – you’ve probably had more than you can count. As a result, you have honed your skills at listening, demonstrating empathy and smoothly performing painless deaths.

Yet, despite the frequency of EOL-related interactions with clients, there is little research about what clients actually prefer when it comes to EOL decisions and care.

To help fill this void, my colleagues and I conducted a study¹ in which we surveyed US pet owners and asked them about their EOL preferences.

Our sample consisted of 2043 pet owners (average age = 39), including 55% dog owners, 22% cat owners, and 23% who owned at least one dog and one cat.

The majority of respondents were female, White, not employed in veterinary or animal-related professions and reported visiting their veterinarian at least 1-2 times a year.

So, what did we find?

Crematories and Cemeteries

We first asked a series of questions about crematories and cemeteries. When we asked about crematories, we found that out of those who had made cremation decisions, 43% prefer to work with a specific crematory and 96% of these owners reported that being able to work with their preferred crematory was important to them.

Similar results were found for cemeteries. Of those who had made burial decisions, 70% prefer a specific cemetery and 96% reported that it was important to use their preferred cemetery in the future.

Aftercare Facilities

When we asked about aftercare facilities, the majority of owners (84%) reported feeling it was important that their veterinarian visit/tour any aftercare facility they recommend.

After-Death Body Care

We next asked owners how they felt about several common options used for body storage immediately after death. We found that owners view a blanket/shroud as the most acceptable option and a trash bag as the least acceptable (**Table 1**).

Table 1. Participants' Views on Acceptability of After-Death Body Storage Options (Before Burial or Cremation)

	Unacceptable	Neutral	Acceptable
Blanket/shroud	87 (4.3%)	596 (29.5%)	1334 (66.1%)
Designated cadaver bag	163 (8.1%)	789 (39.1%)	1065 (52.8%)
Casket	152 (7.5%)	831 (41.2%)	1034 (51.3%)
Trash bag	1290 (64.0%)	413 (20.5)	314 (15.6%)

Communication Regarding Pet Death, Dying and After-Death Body Care

EOL client communication involves numerous aspects - What to talk about? How much do owners want to know? Do clients expect you to talk with them for hours? To try and answer some of these questions, we asked a series of questions about EOL communication. First, perhaps unsurprising, we found that owners turn to their veterinary team for EOL information more than any other source - more than friends, family, or other pet owners.

How much information?

When we asked owners how much information they want from their veterinarian about EOL and after-death body care issues, the most common response for EOL issues was: "I typically want input from my vet; but I like to make decisions as an equal partner". For after-death body care, the most common response was "I typically want input from my vet, but I like to mostly make decisions myself".

When is the right time for EOL conversations?

We found that owners' preferred time is "after my pet becomes sick but before death" (endorsed by 41% of owners), followed by

"during my pet's death, such as during a euthanasia appointment" (endorsed by 23%).

How long of a conversation are they expecting?

A common fear is that owners want to discuss EOL issues for long periods of time, making it challenging to fit these conversations into already crammed schedules. Yet, we found that nearly 75% of owners indicated they felt the topic could be covered in 20 minutes or less, and the most common response was 5-10 minutes (chosen by 33.0% of owners).

Amount of information details

The amount of information details owners want about the death/dying process and after-death body care differs based on the



Table 2. Owner Preference for Amount of Information Given About Specific Death/Dying and After-Death Body Care Aspects

	I want all the details	I want general information but don't need all the details	I would prefer to just be told what I need to know
The death/dying process (euthanasia, hospice)	763 (37.8%)	943 (46.7%)	314 (15.5%)
What happens to pet after death while still at the veterinary hospital	618 (30.6%)	770 (38.1%)	632 (31.3%)
What happens to my pet at the cemetery or crematorium	572 (28.3%)	696 (34.5%)	752 (37.2%)
Options to memorialize my pet	912 (45.1%)	687 (34.0%)	421 (20.8%)

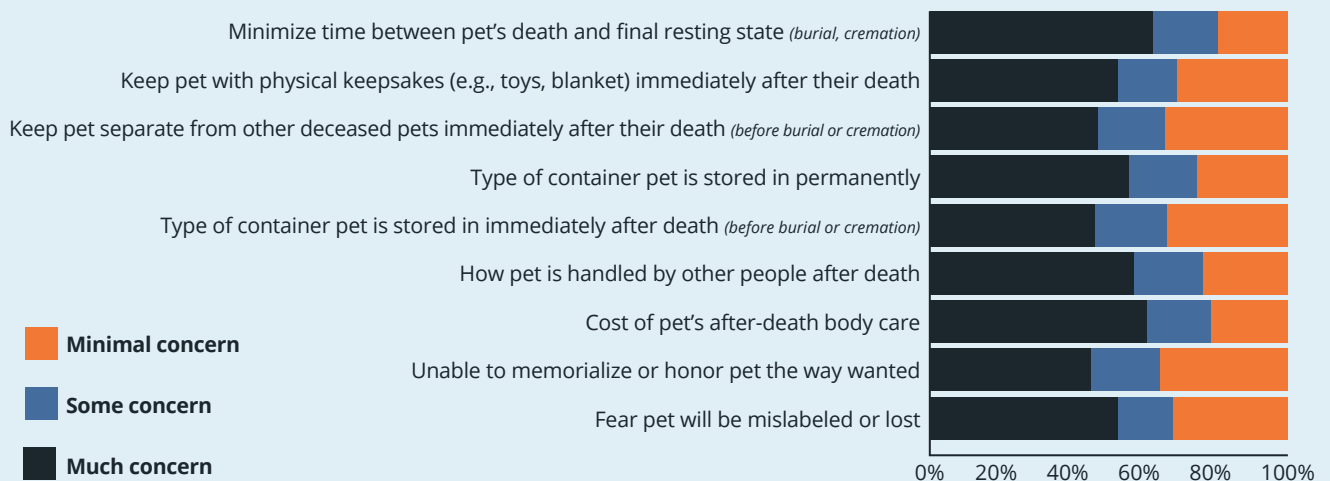
topic. They want the most information about options to memorialize their pet and the least amount of information about what happens to their pet at the cemetery or crematorium.

Regarding the death/dying process and what happens to their pet after death while still at the veterinary hospital, owners want just general information (Table 2).

Owners' Concerns About After-Death Body Care

Owners expressed significant concerns over many aspects of after-death body care. Their top concerns include the amount of time between their pet's death and their final resting state, how their pet's body is handled after death, the type of container their pet is permanently stored in, and cost (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Concerns Regarding After-Death Body Care



Recommendations

The following are recommendations based on a better understanding of what owners want regarding EOL conversations and after-death body care.

Dissemination of Information

Proactively take the time needed to address owners' concerns and options regarding EOL issues including after-death body care:

- Inquire about owners' preferences for a specific crematory/cemetery and respect their wishes. If they have no preference, present a choice of local pet after-death body care options.
- Provide written explanations of after-death body care services/offering - including cost.
- Utilize standardized forms to reduce liability risk and increase transparency.

Procedures

1. Use designated cadaver bags or containers.
2. Use procedural checklists and/or technology to track bodies to minimize chances of errors.

- Immediately label bodies (ideally within 30 minutes of appointment completion).
- Submit pet information to aftercare companies as soon as possible (ideally within 1 hour of appointment completion).
- Ensure bodies leave the hospital with proper labeling and instructions.

Partner With Aftercare Companies

Visit local pet aftercare facilities (ideally annually) to familiarize yourself with their offerings and policies and ensure they meet industry (and your) standards.

EOL conversations can be challenging. Yet, knowing owners' preferences - and doing what you can to honor these - can help ensure your EOL-related communications help foster a stronger client-veterinary bond.

About the Author

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¹Cooney, K., Kogan, LR*, Brookes, SL, Ellis, CA. Pet owners' expectations for pet end-of-life support and after-death body care: Exploration and practical applications (2021) Topics in Companion Animal Medicine, 43, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tcam.2020.100503>.

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