

The Gift of Good-bye

Hospice care eases the way | By Shea Cox, DVM

“They have been our loyal companions throughout their lives, and in hospice, they need to know that we will dance to the end of the song with them.”

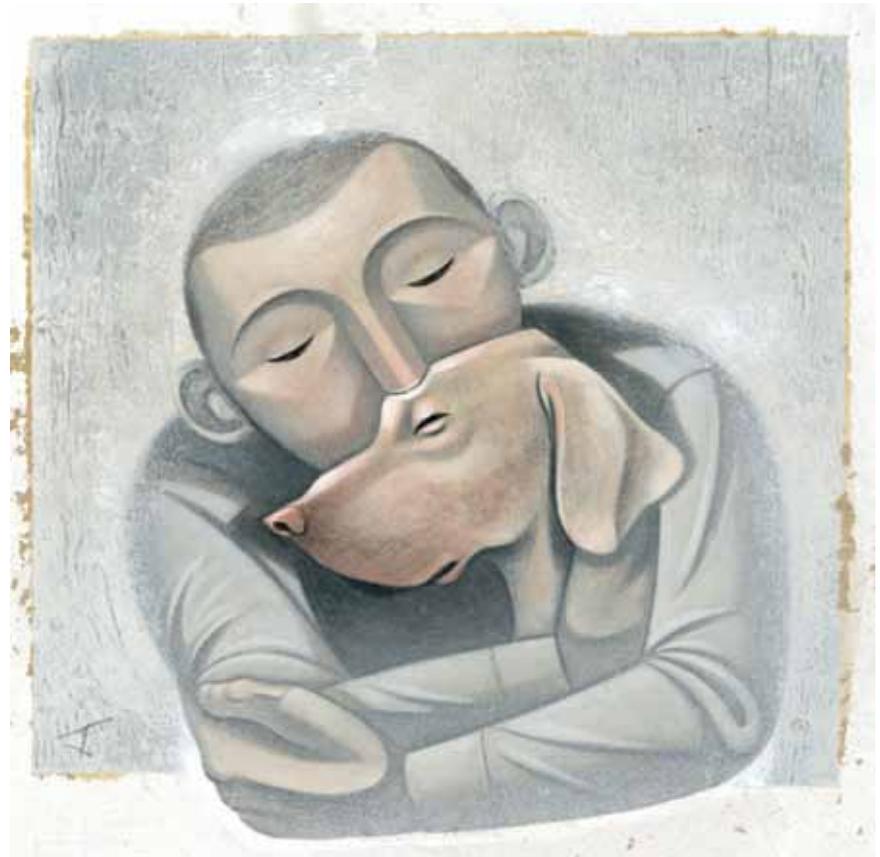
—Thomas F. Wilson, PhD

WHEN OUR DOGS ARE YOUNG and healthy, it seems as though we have all the time in the world with them. But, as it always does, time catches up with us, and eventually, the “end of the song” begins to play. For many of us, our companion animals are so integral to our lives that their decline and death affect us similarly to the loss of human family members.

However, the heart-wrenching words “Nothing else can be done” do not mean that euthanasia is the only option. As they move into the closing stages of their lives, pets (we’ll focus on dogs here, but the concept is the same for other companion animals) can benefit from animal hospice, and so can their people.

Like the program for humans, animal hospice exists to provide support and care during the last phase of an incurable disease or at the natural end of life; its primary goal is to manage pain. As such, hospice care is geared toward maintaining comfort and ensuring the highest quality of life possible during a time that may be measured in months, weeks or days. It focuses on creating a safe, loving and intimate end-of-life experience in a familiar setting.

This approach also gives us time to plan, grieve and say good-bye to our dogs. And—perhaps most importantly—it is a way to allow our best friends to spend their final days at home rather than in a hospital setting. This interval



can be invaluable, as it helps us come to grips with our dog’s condition, and to say good-bye in our own way.

Though it can be extremely rewarding, hospice care does require preparation and effort. The first step is to connect with a veterinarian who is comfortable with the concept (not all are). He or she will guide you in how to best provide for your dog’s needs, and in setting up a care plan to carry out at home: administering medications, supplying nutritional support, recognizing pain, implementing proper nursing care and tuning into your dog’s general emotional and physical state. If you are unsure about taking on these kinds of

responsibilities, you may be able to employ a vet technician to assist you as needed.

As mentioned, one of the most important aspects of hospice care is pain management. Because it is easier to prevent pain than to relieve it, a multimodal approach—in which a variety of methods, including various classes of pain medications, natural supplements, acupuncture and massage therapy, to name a few, are employed—usually results in the best control. Part of this protocol involves monitoring your dog’s behavior and physical state, since agitation and vocalization may be signs of pain.

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In providing hospice care, you are the eyes and ears of the veterinary team, recording changes in your dog’s weight, temperature, eating habits, mobility and other characteristics and reporting them to the vet so that interventions or adjustments to the care plan can be made in a timely manner.

When it comes to end-of-life matters, we are faced with the difficult decision of allowing for a natural death or intervening with humane euthanasia; for some, a natural death is preferable to euthanasia as long as no suffering is involved. The decision if and when to euthanize is as individual and personal as you and your dog, and it’s important to keep in mind that no one knows your dog better than you do. You have spent your dog’s lifetime learning to communicate by reading body language and developing a unique bond. Attend to what your dog may be trying to tell you and, above all, trust your heart.

Identifying the point at which your dog’s quality of life has irrevocably ebbed requires personal courage and sacrifice, and many people fear they will not be able to recognize when the time is right. Seek guidance in the decision-making process from family members and friends, as well as from your veterinarian, all of whom share a bond with your dog. You will need the support of those who truly understand.

After months (or more) of caring for a dog in declining health, it can often be difficult to decide when the end has come, which is why it is helpful to determine ahead of time at what point you feel your dog’s quality of life is no longer acceptable. This may be when he or she ceases to find joy in eating, no longer enjoys interaction and connection, can no longer stand or walk, or when pain begins to be difficult to control. It is often helpful to consider good days versus bad days; more bad days than good is another indicator that the time is near. By establishing these criteria in advance, you are better prepared to make the appropriate decision, since emotion can cloud your thinking during the difficult final days of your dog’s life.

Hospice can be a wonderful, caring option. Regardless of how you choose to navigate this stage, it is good to know that it exists. Whether we opt for a natural death or a peaceful euthanasia, hospice care not only allows our dogs to live out the remainder of their lives as fully as possible, it also allows them to embark upon their final journey with dignity while surrounded by love in the comfort of their familiar home environment. Hospice care is truly a gift, both to our dogs and to ourselves. 

The American Association of Human-Animal Bond Veterinarians
aahabv.org

Numerous information links for human as well as animal hospice issues.

Argus Institute, Colorado State University

argusinstitute.colostate.edu

This vet school program is a pioneer in helping pet owners manage the caring for a sick animal.

International Association of Animal Hospice and Palliative Care
iaahpc.org

A listing for hospice-care help in your area; see “For Pet Parents.”

Franklin D. McMillan, DVM, DACVIM

Lecture Notes: “Quality of Life in Animals”

dcavm.org/06sep.html

Though his comments are to veterinarians, he also provides insights for you.

Alice Villalobos, DVM, DPNAP
pawspice.com

She is best known for treating cancer; you’ll also find the details of her QOL scale, search for “Quality of Life Scale.”

Dr. Cox blogs about a hospice patient’s journey at thebark.com/cox, where you’ll also find the reference list for this article.