

UNDER THE WEATHER

The Beginning of the End

I stood near the hospital bed where my father lay, watching the boundless sea and the setting sun. This was to be a daily pattern over the next 25 days, where thoughts of life, death and suffering took centre stage. My father fought, never complaining; and finally lost the battle. During that time, and in the weeks to follow, I thought of my patients who suffered similarly, and I vowed to use my experience in making better decisions towards end-of-life care in pets.

We all know that life must end, at some point. What most of us are not prepared for is the way it ends. Whether it is a human or non-human companion, the loss is always hard to bear. However, if we force ourselves to think about it in advance, it will allow us to make better decisions regarding end-of-life care for our four legged companions.

Our pets unfortunately have extremely short life-spans. Take large breeds like Mastiffs or Great Danes whose average life-span is 8-10 years, or the smaller breeds like Lhasas who may be lucky to live till 14. However, it averages to around 12 years for most breeds. And at the end of that pre-coded life-span, something has to happen to end it all. In dogs, heart disease, chronic renal failure and cancer are the three most common diseases responsible for mortality in older pets. So how should pet parents make decisions regarding management of these diseases? When do you decide that enough has been done in way of treatment? Here is where you need to work closely with your vet. Understand the illness, explore treatment as well as management options in potentially terminal illnesses. Make sure you understand the long term options and have a discussion with your family about it. All too often, doctors are faced with the dilemma of differences of opinion within the family. There are some members of the family who want to go all out in terms



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of treatment, and some who believe that the vet is unnecessarily prolonging a hopeless situation. It is best if you come to a consensus within the family and convey your views to the vet, so that he/she can come up with the best treatment/management options. If the disease is such that there is very little chance of a cure, and if your pet has lived a full life, it may be wiser to avoid heroic measures to prolong life, because in most cases, you only end up prolonging suffering.

In animals, unlike in humans, euthanasia is an option we can exercise if the pet is suffering. However, there are cultural differences – in the West, euthanasia as an option is exercised easily (sometimes too easily, I think). Here in India, we are extremely reluctant to

choose that option. This is because in our culture, we revere life. Even if that life has no quality, no dignity. And that is where I think we need to strike a balance. When we know that prolonging life means prolonging suffering, why would we not choose a release from the suffering? The decision is far from easy. What helps is if you have certain parameters to judge quality of life. Look for what is important to you and your pet, and use those as guidelines. Food, play, mobility, pain, hydration, hygiene, interest in people and surroundings, happiness – make your own list, and assess the improvement on all these parameters.

If euthanasia is not an option you are comfortable with when your pet has a terminal illness, make sure two things are addressed – pain and sleep. Pain medications and sedatives will help ease the suffering, and along with other supportive treatment, help in caring for terminally ill pets.

Lastly, when you are agonising over euthanasia v/s treatment, remember, your decision will be the right one, because it is made with love and care for the welfare of your companion. 



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