

Guiding Principles for Companion Animals

Quality of life and euthanasia

Guiding Principle: Animals have a right to basic needs and considerations, including a life without unnecessary pain and suffering. It is the veterinarian's responsibility to educate the client about signs of pain and options for timely treatment.

Unnecessary pain and suffering

The responsibility to relieve pain and suffering in animals is shared jointly by the owner and the veterinarian. It is the responsibility of the owner to seek veterinary care for conditions that cause pain. Every animal seen by the veterinarian should be evaluated on a standardized pain rating scale, such as the Glasgow Pain Scale, or other recognized scale. This will ensure that pain is being appropriately addressed regardless of the cause.

Timeliness of pain management

It is often difficult, especially with subtle changes, for an owner to determine whether or not an animal is in pain/distress. Therefore, veterinarians should educate clients to seek veterinary care when there are overt signs of pain or changes in behavior, routine, activity level or weight. It then becomes the responsibility of the veterinarian to offer appropriate pain control for the animal.

Euthanasia

Situations arise where the suffering of the patient cannot be managed appropriately due to medical or financial constraints. In these situations, timely euthanasia should be recommended to the owner of the patient to prevent needless suffering. Implementing quality of life questionnaires may help owners work through this evaluation and decision-making process. Euthanasia can be a difficult decision for owners to make for a variety of reasons. However, it is the veterinarian's responsibility to assess the pain and suffering and make the appropriate recommendation for the animal.

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Housing

Guiding Principle: Housing must be suitable to the physiologic needs of the animal at each stage of its life and in all weather conditions.

Enclosures

Enclosures must allow pets to maintain their normal body temperature, be sheltered from the elements, stay dry, breathe air that is conducive to good health, have access to potable water, and to be safe from injury. Enclosures must allow each animal to assume unencumbered normal postural movements (e.g., standing up, turning around and lying down), and to be able to eliminate away from sleeping and eating areas.

Hazards

Veterinarians should educate clients on seasonal hazards such as lawn chemicals, salts, debris, hot surfaces and sharp objects.

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Tethering

Guiding Principle: Unsupervised tethering of a dog is unacceptable as the primary method of confinement due to serious physical and behavioral consequences.

Physical risks include injury and strangulation.

Behavioral risks associated with tethering include aggression, fear biting, self mutilation, stereotypy (engaging in purposeless behaviors repetitively), escape behaviors, inappropriate barking, poor socialization and resistance to leash training.

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Population Control

Guiding Principle: Population control is a major welfare concern involving client education of pregnancy prevention, behavioral issues, identification of animals, and maintenance of a secure environment.

Education

Every effort should be made by veterinarians to educate clients about the seriousness of their personal responsibility in the population control effort. This should include client education about the medical risks of pregnancy, the challenge of preventing pregnancies, as well as the benefits and risks of a sterilization procedure.

Identify behavioral problems

Pet behavior problems combined with lack of owner understanding of normal animal behavior is the single most common reason for animal relinquishment. Veterinarians play a key role in the prevention of relinquishment through client education and correction of animal behavioral problems. Efforts should be made to discuss behavioral issues with clients at least once a year and especially with new clients and/or their animals. Veterinarians should stress the importance of training and proper socialization. Examples of behavioral questions which may be asked are:

- How many litter boxes are there per cat? Are there any urination or defecation accidents occurring? How often are litter boxes cleaned?
- Does the cat ever show aggression towards people?
- How does the dog react to guests coming into the house, i.e., is it happy to greet them, hiding, or growling?
- How does the dog react around other animals?
- Does the dog allow treats, food or toys to be taken away?
- When the dog is outside is it in a fenced in yard, on a leash or tethered?
- Are there any big changes in the foreseeable future (move, baby, divorce) that might affect the pet?

Behavior is a very complex issue. It is strongly recommended that clients be referred to a qualified trainer or behaviorist when the veterinarian is unequipped to fully address the issue.

Identification

To prevent loss of animals and increase the likelihood of return if the animal goes missing, veterinarians should discuss forms of identification and maintenance of a secure environment with clients. If an animal has a microchip, remind clients to update their information with the microchip company yearly.

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Exercise and Environmental Enrichment

Guiding Principle: Animal care and husbandry must include an adequate amount of exercise and environmental enrichment appropriate for the animal's breed, species, age, health and physical condition.

Enough exercise should be provided to maintain proper weight and level of fitness. Physical exercise and mental stimulation can prevent negative behaviors associated with restlessness and boredom such as destructive behavior to property and aggression.

Environmental enrichment allows for adequate socialization with humans and/or other animals, depending upon species and breed. Environmental enrichment should also include some sort of mental stimulation such as games, companions, bird watching, group play, etc., to help ensure mental and emotional wellbeing.

Animals' needs change as they age, so exercise and enrichment should be tailored towards their life-stage and temperament. Veterinarians should use the opportunity at the annual wellness exam or other visits to discuss exercise and enrichment programs.

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Nutrition

Guiding Principle: Over and under nutrition are common in companion animals, and can lead to debilitating disease. Veterinarians should offer owners information on feeding, relevant to each individual animal.

Assessment

To make the most appropriate recommendation, nutrition should be assessed at every physical examination. Diet history should include type of food being fed and whether it is dry, semi-moist, canned or raw, as well as brand name and amount. The examination and record should include both the current weight and the Body Condition Score. (In an effort to standardize veterinary records, use a scale such as the Laflamme 1-9 body condition scale to determine body condition.)

In addition, other indicators of nutritional wellbeing should be assessed: muscle condition, hair and skin condition, stool quality, amount of body fat, joint disease, and other weight related disease (i.e. collapsing trachea), etc.

With aforementioned information, the veterinarian can determine if the animal is receiving adequate nutrition for its species, age, health and lifestyle. Recommendations should be specific including how much and how often to feed, and when the animal should return for a weight check.

Education

Veterinarians should educate owners on choosing appropriate food for their pet. Pet food labels may not provide sufficient information to predict food quality. To make sure the animal is receiving the most appropriate, affordable food, discuss brands, labels and quality ingredients with clients.

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Public Health and Zoonotic Disease Guiding Principle

Guiding Principle: The WVMA believes that the strong link between human and animal health makes it the responsibility of all veterinarians to be informed about zoonotic diseases and to educate their staff, clients and the community.

Client Education

Veterinarians are encouraged to make their clients aware of animal ownership risks, including zoonotic diseases. Special attention needs to be given to households that include people at a higher risk for infection, for example, the immuno-compromised, young children, pregnant women and elderly persons. Clients must be informed when an animal is diagnosed with, or is suspected of harboring a zoonotic disease. Veterinarians should emphasize preventive measures appropriate to each family member. In addition, veterinarians are encouraged to routinely address prevention of animal bites, as they also constitute a public health issue.

Staff Education

Informing staff members of a potential zoonotic disease risk is crucial within a veterinary practice. Veterinarians are strongly encouraged to educate their team members on zoonotic diseases that are commonly seen by the practice. Part of this staff education must include how the disease is transmitted to humans and how it can be prevented. To address these concerns, clinics should establish an infectious disease policy regarding such issues as patient handling, personal protective equipment, isolation, and cleaning in accordance with applicable Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) standards.

Professional Collaboration

For the health of all species it is important that veterinarians and the WVMA communicate with other professionals, including physicians and public health officials, to ensure the best disease care and prevention for patients, clients and the community. Be aware that some diseases require mandatory reporting to state officials.

Resources

A list of reportable diseases can be found at the Wisconsin Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection website:

http://datcp.wi.gov/Animals/Animal_Diseases/Reporting_Disease/index.aspx

An organized list of zoonotic diseases by species can be found at the UC Santa Barbara Office of Research website:

<http://www.research.ucsb.edu/compliance/animal-subjects/veterinary-care/zoonotic-diseases/#Carnivora>

Other Helpful Resources:

CDC: Parasites of Public Health Concern <http://www.dpd.cdc.gov/dpdx/>

CDC: Emerging Infectious Disease Journal <http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/>

WI Rabies Prevention Flowchart

<http://hanplus.wisc.edu/DISEASES/rabies/introduction.htm>

WI DATCP: Reporting a suspected foreign animal disease:

<http://datcp.wi.gov/Animals/Veterinarians/index.aspx>