

Overview of Euthanasia of Animals

Animals always have been and still are an important part of our lives. In ancient Egypt, animals like dogs and cats were held as pets, along with monkeys, falcons, lions and other animals. The affection given to pets back in ancient Egypt is comparable to the affection we have for pets these days: deep love. Despite the fact that people in ancient Egypt held very exotic animals as pets, dogs and cats were the Egyptians favorite pets. Just as today, dogs were “considered very important members of the household” and as such “were regularly buried with their masters.” To ancient Egyptians, this love extended beyond mortal life. The dogs not necessarily died before the owner became deceased. Evidence shows that dogs sometimes were killed once their owner died to be mummified and buried with the master.

Euthanasia of animals, more particular of pets or companion animals, is becoming a topic of public concern even though numbers of euthanized animals have been declining since 1970 from about 15 million pets having been euthanized to about 1.5 million euthanized dogs and cats in animal shelters as reported by the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) in 2017. But what does euthanasia mean? The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines euthanasia as “the act or practice of killing or permitting the death of hopelessly sick or injured individuals (such as persons or domestic animals) in a relatively painless way for reasons of mercy.” One could argue by using the word euthanasia instead of killing we are feeling better and performing an act that is ethically and morally acceptable. After all, the word euthanasia has its origin in the Greek word “euthanatos,” which means “good death.”

People provide several reasons to justify euthanizing their pet. Some are very valid reasons while others may be based on human concerns like lack of money, the pet’s behavioral issues, and convenience. However, in certain circumstances alternatives to euthanasia are available, but the owner may not make the effort and invest the time to find a new home for his or her companion pet. It may seem easier to have the pet euthanized. While reasons to euthanize a pet based on changed circumstances in life vary, the majority of dog and cat owners who seek euthanasia list age or illness as the main justifications.

Euthanasia not only places a heavy burden on pet owners making such decision, it also imposes ethical and moral concerns on the people performing euthanasia such as veterinarians or shelter employees. While veterinarians and animal shelter workers are mainly concerned in helping and caring for the animals under their control, euthanasia requests force them to do the opposite depending on the reasoning behind the euthanasia request. For animal shelters, the main reason to euthanize animals is overcrowding of the shelters due to an overpopulation of unwanted and abandoned animals. A shelter may also euthanize animals deemed “unadoptable.” Veterinarians sometimes face an equally difficult ethical dilemma when an owner does not want to have his or her pet euthanized due to a terminal disease or injury. In that instance, the veterinarian needs to make sure that the owner makes an informed decision in the best interest of the animal and not his own to avoid unnecessary pain and suffering for the pet.

To conform with state laws, animal shelters have to obey certain regulations before they are able to euthanize a pet. This may include waiting a certain length of time and giving written notice to registered owners. If the owner is unknown, the animal shelter needs to make a public notice so the owner might have the possibility to claim his or her pet. If the owner does not claim the animal in a certain period of time, which can last up to about fifteen days depending on the state, the shelter may euthanize the animal.

As of today, forty-nine states have passed laws to regulate euthanasia of animals. Euthanasia can only be performed by a licensed vet or technician. Methods of euthanasia on animals are either spelled out in laws or regulations, but veterinarians also look for guidance with best practices established by the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA). The AVMA has drafted guidelines to provide veterinarians with assistance to relieve the “pain and suffering of animals that are to be euthanized.”

States make an effort to follow the AVMA guidelines in implementing the AVMA’s recommendations into their laws. The majority of states agree to using sodium pentobarbital by injection as the standard method for animal euthanasia. Besides following the AVMA guidelines in using sodium pentobarbital as the standard euthanasia method, some states allow other methods for performing animal euthanasia such as the use of other chemicals for injection or gas chambers. In a minority of states, the use of gas chambers as a euthanasia method is either confirmed or suspected as of today.

Certain states also enacted laws dealing with emergency euthanasia to prevent mostly law enforcement officers from being liable of cruelty against animals when the officer has no other choice as to humanely euthanize a dog by gunshot. Such circumstances arise where the dog is dangerous and represents a threat to the health and safety of the public or another animal. A law enforcement officer might also be allowed to shoot a dog that is so severely injured or diseased and, after reasonable, but unsuccessful efforts to locate the dog’s owner, additional time would result in inhumanely prolonging the animal’s pain and suffering.

Euthanasia statistics are mostly based on voluntary surveys from participating animal shelters, but a few states enacted laws that make it mandatory for at least public shelters to maintain euthanasia records and to make such records available either upon request or publication. It seems that more and more states may begin to follow that trend and to also require privately held shelters to keep records in regards to the administration of sodium pentobarbital.

Other unforeseen issues arise with pet euthanasia. A few decades ago, some pet owners made provisions in their wills to have their pets euthanized once they died. The companion animal owners were afraid that, after their deaths, no one would take care of their pets. These wills were contested in court to determine if the testators’ provisions ordering the euthanasia of the pets were valid. The courts always consistently declared such provisions in the will to be invalid as against public policy. Today, there is no need for pet owners to worry about their pets after the owner’s death. States have enacted pet trust laws to ensure care for the pet after the owner’s death.

The majority of states have enacted laws dealing with euthanasia, but those laws differ tremendously. While some states enacted detailed laws describing the permitted euthanasia method, others offer limited guidance for euthanasia without even providing for the method and circumstances involving animal euthanasia. However, the state legislatures have not come to a halt on regulations concerning animal euthanasia. During the past years, some states have either passed new laws, finalized, or proposed new regulations. With the public becoming more aware of the topic of animal euthanasia, legislatures could be forced to implement more detailed regulations for animal euthanasia. In addition, the more people are becoming aware of animal euthanasia, the greater there is a chance to reduce euthanasia rates through measures like increased animal sterilization, pet owner education, pet medical insurance, and microchipping.