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Kunzendorf, Ida Therese Holst; Vogt, Nadia; Hansen, Tia G. B.

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Family Animal Veterinarians' Perception of Their Euthanasia Related Roles and Challenges: An Interview Study

Ida Kunzendorf, Nadia Vogt & Tia Hansen
Center for Human Animal Psychology (CHAP)
Aalborg University, Denmark

INTRODUCTION

- Euthanasia is an intrinsic part of veterinarian practice.
- The (Danish) vet study curriculum covers euthanasia sparsely, and mainly its technical aspects.
- Involvement in the ending of a family animal's life may entail multiple concurrent roles, not all of which are of a medical nature.
- Families typically grieve the loss of their animal (Adams et al, 2000). For them, the vet is often the messenger of grief to come, and may be the first responder to their grief.

RESEARCH QUESTION

How do vets perceive their roles related to family animal euthanasia, and what psychologically relevant dilemmas and needs may arise?

METHOD

- Participants ($N=4$; 27-51 years) were recruited for a thesis in psychology.
- All had graduated as vets and specialized in companion (family) animals from Copenhagen University, and all worked in practices targeting this segment.
- In-depth semistructured interviews were conducted and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) applied, taking a hermeneutical-phenomenological approach.
- Interpretation used organizational role theory (Katz & Kahn, 1978), emotion work (Hochschild, 1979) and sympathy (Clark, 1997), and aimed at situated generalization (Busch-Jensen & Schraube, 2019).



Drawing by Marja Holst

"The animal mustn't suffer ... important that it happens peacefully ... at people's homes or in quiet surroundings [to avoid] stress"

"It's about reading people, looking at their body language, how much do they speak. It's the tiny details"

"I make an effort to show that I understand how they feel, that I've been there myself, that it's the right decision they're making"

THEMES

Performing euthanasia well

- Planning and context
- Supporting the owner

Emotional displays

- Owners' needs and feelings
- Vet's own emotions

Vet professional roles

- The vet as the animal advocate
- The vet as a business employee

Working with people

- (Not in) education
- Challenges
- Breaking Bad News

"Sometimes we cry with [the family]. If it didn't hurt us, too, once in a while, we would be made of steel"

"When I think euthanasia is the best help ... it's hard not being allowed to perform it"

"Knowing about different types of personalities and ways of reacting would have been nice"

POSSIBLE ROLE CONFLICT

"If I want many clients, I speak nicely to people and don't tell them off, because if I don't tell them off, hopefully they'll return"

"It's hard when [owners] are in shock. What do you say to them? Sometimes they go all blank, and you cannot tell what they hear and not"

"I think some owners would benefit from having someone to talk to about their thoughts and feelings. Some of them lie awake at night"

DISCUSSION

The vets all expressed euthanasia related challenges in relation to the owners. On the one hand they felt adequately covered in their professional and client work, on the other they noted psychological gaps in the vet study. This calls for a discussion of 2 main areas:

- What psychological knowledge and skills do veterinarians want / need to supplement the medical expertise when working with people as well as animals?
 - Theoretical and psychological knowledge about Breaking Bad News, grief reactions and -handling, client behaviour and -communication.
- Which euthanasia related psychological and emotional needs do owners have?
 - What are the clients' perspective? Do they need counselling and support, and what do they expect from the vet in this regard?

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CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Euthanasia of family animals have come to require much more from the vet than medical expertise. Veterinarians in this study were found to balance three roles of which two might be in conflict, and the third one – psychological support for families – a more prominent part of their job than expected and educated for. We suggest development of curriculum that addresses all three roles and their interrelatedness and interactions.

Further exploration of family animal owners' euthanasia related needs is warranted and development of training programs that combine veterinary and psychological knowledge seems relevant.

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