

8. Euthanasia of animals

Updated 4 December 2024

Introduction

8.1 Euthanasia may be defined as 'painless killing to relieve suffering'. Veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses should be aware that these events are often highly emotionally charged. In these circumstances, small actions and/or omissions can take on a disproportionate level of importance. It is recommended that all practice staff involved in euthanasia are fully trained and a planned, rehearsed and coordinated approach is taken.

8.2 Euthanasia is not, in law, an act of veterinary surgery, and in most circumstances may be carried out by anyone provided that it is carried out humanely. No veterinary surgeon is obliged to kill a healthy animal unless required to do so under statutory powers as part of their conditions of employment. Veterinary surgeons do, however, have the privilege of being able to relieve an animal's suffering in this way in appropriate cases.

8.3 The decision to euthanise an animal will be based on an assessment of many factors. These may include:

- (a) the extent and nature of the disease or injuries;
- (b) availability of other treatment options;
- (c) the prognosis and potential quality of life after treatment including whether an animal functions and feels well and has capacity for natural behaviours that are species specific;
- (d) the availability and likelihood of success of treatment; and
- (e) the animal's age and/or other disease/health.

Difficulties with the decision

Where there are no health or welfare concerns

8.4 Veterinary surgeons may face difficulties with the decision where a request is made by a client for the destruction of an animal where in the clinical/professional judgement of the veterinary surgeon destruction of the animal is not necessary. While the veterinary surgeon's primary obligation is to relieve the suffering of an animal, the owner's wishes and circumstances are also relevant. Veterinary surgeons should be mindful that refusing an owner's request for euthanasia may add to the owner's distress and could be detrimental to the welfare of the animal.

8.5 In relation to dogs and cats presented for euthanasia where in judgement of the veterinary surgeon destruction of the animal is not necessary, for instance where there are no health or welfare reasons for the animal to be euthanised, the veterinary surgeon should establish the current keeper's relationship with the animal, which should include scanning for a microchip. If a microchip is found, the relevant database should be checked before carrying out euthanasia. If no microchip is found, this should be recorded on the clinical record.

8.6 Further, veterinary surgeons should note that where the dog or cat in question has been rehomed from a shelter, clients may have a contract such that the dog or cat can be returned to that shelter and so it may be appropriate to discuss this with the client prior to euthanasia. Alternatively, there may be another individual willing to take responsibility for the dog or cat (who may be named on the microchip database), and this may also be discussed with the client.

8.7 In relation to cats, clients may have brought in a healthy cat under the mistaken impression that the cat is a stray. It is therefore important to check whether there is another owner who has responsibility, or is willing to take responsibility, for the cat, who may be named on the microchip database.

Cost of treatment

8.8 Where the reason for a request for euthanasia is the inability of the client to pay for private treatment, it may be appropriate to make known the options and eligibility for charitable assistance or referral for charitable treatment. Note that the inability of an owner to pay for treatment should not prevent the provision of first aid and pain relief, which may include euthanasia (see [Chapter 3 24-hour emergency first aid and pain relief](https://www.rcvs.org.uk/setting-standards/advice-and-guidance/code-of-professional-conduct-for-veterinary-surgeons/supporting-guidance/24-hour-emergency-first-aid-and-pain-relief/) [\[https://www.rcvs.org.uk/setting-standards/advice-and-guidance/code-of-professional-conduct-for-veterinary-surgeons/supporting-guidance/24-hour-emergency-first-aid-and-pain-relief/\]](https://www.rcvs.org.uk/setting-standards/advice-and-guidance/code-of-professional-conduct-for-veterinary-surgeons/supporting-guidance/24-hour-emergency-first-aid-and-pain-relief/)).

Conscientious objection

8.9 Where, in all conscience, a veterinary surgeon cannot accede to a client's request for euthanasia, they should recognise the extreme sensitivity of the situation and make sympathetic efforts to direct the client to another veterinary surgeon and alternative sources of advice. Further information regarding conscientious objection can be found in [Chapter 2 Veterinary Care \[https://www.rcvs.org.uk/setting-standards/advice-and-guidance/code-of-professional-conduct-for-veterinary-surgeons/supporting-guidance/veterinary-care/#conscientious-objection\]](https://www.rcvs.org.uk/setting-standards/advice-and-guidance/code-of-professional-conduct-for-veterinary-surgeons/supporting-guidance/veterinary-care/#conscientious-objection).

Owner's refusal

8.10 Where a veterinary surgeon is concerned about an owner's refusal to consent to euthanasia, veterinary surgeons can only advise their clients and act in accordance with their professional judgement. A veterinary surgeon should guide the client in making the end-of-life decision by helping them understand the animal's quality of life and outlining options using sensitivity and compassion. The veterinary surgeon and the client should work together to determine the most humane outcome.

8.11 Where a veterinary surgeon is concerned that an animal's welfare is compromised because of an owner's refusal to consent to euthanasia, a veterinary surgeon may take steps to resolve the situation, for example, by facilitating another veterinary opinion for the client within a reasonable timeframe. If the client insists on taking the animal home against veterinary advice, it may then be necessary to breach client confidentiality by making a report to the RSPCA ([Chapter 14 - Client Confidentiality \[https://www.rcvs.org.uk/setting-standards/advice-and-guidance/code-of-professional-conduct-for-veterinary-surgeons/supporting-guidance/client-confidentiality/\]](https://www.rcvs.org.uk/setting-standards/advice-and-guidance/code-of-professional-conduct-for-veterinary-surgeons/supporting-guidance/client-confidentiality/)).

Euthanasia without the owner's consent

8.12 A veterinary surgeon is responsible for the animal when it is an inpatient at the practice and may commit an offence under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 (which applies in England and Wales), the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006 or the Welfare of Animals (Northern Ireland) Act 2011 if an act, or failure to act, causes an animal to suffer unnecessarily.

8.13 If, in the opinion of the veterinary surgeon, the animal's condition is such that it should, in its own interests, be destroyed without delay, the veterinary surgeon may need to act without the owner's consent. Where this is the case, the veterinary surgeon should make a full record of all the circumstances supporting the decision in case of subsequent challenge. Generally, a decision to euthanise an animal without their owner's consent should be endorsed by a second veterinary surgeon not directly involved in the case until that time. The owner should also be informed of this decision, unless it would not be appropriate to do so in the circumstances.

Requests by inspectors or police

8.14 Under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 (which applies in England and Wales), the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006 and the Welfare of Animals (Northern Ireland) Act 2011, powers to destroy an animal, or arrange for its destruction, can be conferred on an inspector (who may be appointed by the local authority) or a police constable. A veterinary surgeon may be asked to certify the condition of the animal is such that it should in its own interests be destroyed. Veterinary surgeons should note that an inspector or constable may act without a veterinary certificate if there is no reasonable alternative to destruction, and the need for action is such that it is not reasonably practical to wait for a veterinary surgeon.

Destruction of 'dangerous' dogs

8.15 Under the Dogs Acts of 1871 and 1906, the Dog Control Act 1966, the Dangerous Dogs Acts of 1989 and 1991, the Dangerous Dogs (Amendment) Act 1997 and the Dangerous Dogs Order (Northern Ireland) 1991, a destruction order may be made by the Court, Justice of the Peace or Sheriff, and the destruction of a healthy animal is normally involved. In these circumstances, a veterinary surgeon asked to destroy a dog should, unless there is a genuine threat to human safety, request a written and signed order from one of the appropriate statutory authorities.

[< Prev](#)

[^ Supporting guidance](#)

[Next >](#)