

BVA Guide to euthanasia

Please see BVA's guide [The role of the vet in treatment choice decision-making](#) for discussions

Legal aspects

Quality of life and euthanasia

The Animal Welfare Acts 2006 (England and Wales, Scotland) requires owners and others responsible for animals to ensure that the welfare needs of their animals are met. The wellbeing of an animal is the responsibility of its owner.

The RCVS Guide to Professional Conduct outlines guidelines for the euthanasia of healthy animals and euthanasia without the owner's consent also includes specimen consent forms

The BVA new graduate guide contains a section on communication and the practicalities of euthanasia.

An animal is the property of its owner, therefore once euthanased the carcass remains the property of the client and must be disposed of according to applicable regulations for the species. Please see BVA's advice on handling veterinary waste

Sometimes euthanasia may be legally mandated. This is quite common for dangerous dogs, and is almost always the case for notifiable disease control (e.g. FMD and BSE)

The decision whether to euthanase an animal cannot be made without considering what other options are available to the owner and veterinary surgeon (also see The role of the vet in treatment choice decision-making). Could the animal have a good quality of life with treatment, palliative care or by re-homing?

The question of whether death is in an animal's interest is not necessarily black and white, many cases will fall somewhere in the grey area between these two extremes. The solution to a particular situation will depend on many factors including the welfare outcomes for each available option.

Identical animals may benefit from different treatment decisions depending on the environmental situation of each animal. Often decisions reached by a vet will have to take into account owner factors, including the ability to pay for treatment, as well as animal factors and specifically what the owner will do with the animal if it is not euthanased.

An ill animal may be considered to be harmed by death if it could receive treatment that would improve its quality of life; but it would benefit from euthanasia if after treatment it would continue to suffer. An unwanted animal would benefit from death if it is likely to spend a long period of time in an unsuitable kennel

environment. It may be argued that for animals, who 'live in the now' quality of life is more important than quantity of life.

Some vets consider that death is not a welfare issue and believe that euthanasia is not a harm as the animal does not suffer poor welfare when dead. However, it is reasonable to argue that euthanasia is neither a benefit nor a harm (except that the animal is 'missing out on life'). Others might consider that an animal deprived of a positive quality-of-life is harmed by this deprivation.

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Absolutely justified euthanasia

Decision Tree

This Decision Tree has been devised in order to give guidance to vets when faced with euthanasia as a management option for an animal under their care.

It may be useful to consider the following scenarios when using the Decision Tree:

Owned but unwanted healthy animal.

Owned terminally ill, suffering animal; owner wants euthanasia.

Owned terminally ill, suffering animal; owner refuses euthanasia.

Owned terminally ill, mildly suffering animal; owner refuses euthanasia; owner very attached.

Owned terminally ill, suffering animal; owner not available.

Owned animal with illness with minor effect on quality of life—for example, mild heart failure; owner wants euthanasia.



NO



NO

Consent forms

It is important to obtain a consent form from an owner when performing euthanasia. A [template consent form](#) is available (to members) on the BVA website. Explain to the owner carefully and sympathetically what they are signing and talk through with them what it means practically speaking in terms of payment, cremation options, etc.

Fees

It is important to communicate sympathetically to owners the cost implications of euthanasia and clearly explain fees. Some clients may wish to pay before the event so they can leave promptly and others may wish to pay in the consulting room rather than reception. Discuss these options with clients before the euthanasia. If payment is deferred offer for them to call in to pay at a later date, or if possible they may wish to call in at another branch surgery. Offer for them to pay when

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Further reading

Click on the following links for further information:

[BVA guidance on the Practice Standards Scheme](#)

Available at www.bva.co.uk

[RCVS Code of Professional Conduct for Veterinary Surgeons](#)

Available at www.rcvs.org.uk

[General Medical Council \(2013\) 'Personal Beliefs and Medical Practice'](#)

Available at www.gmc-uk.org

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