

Managing grief associated with euthanasia

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Introduction

Staff whose work involves euthanasia of animals can experience significant levels of grief and distress. Much research into this has been conducted among animal shelter workers and veterinarians, for whom an affinity for animals is often part of the choice of occupation (Reeve et al. 2005; Rohlf & Bennett 2005). A range of reactions to euthanasia has been identified including anger, sadness, fear, guilt, irritability, depression, anger, helplessness or hopelessness (Leiser 2008; Martin et al. 2004; Reeve et al. 2005; Rohlf & Bennett 2005; Stafford et al. 1999). Staff can feel threatened or simply philosophically uncomfortable, and may or may not experience euthanasia as a major source of stress (Stafford et al. 1999). Stress is known to correlate with work-family conflict, ill-health, job dissatisfaction and intentions to leave the organisation (Stafford et al. 1999; Reeve et al. 2005). One term that has been used to describe stress associated with euthanasia is “moral stress”, or the stress experienced when people are required to perform actions they have difficulty justifying on moral grounds (Rollin 1986). It is important to note that grief or stress reactions to performing euthanasia is not experienced by all individuals undertaking this work, and it is not experienced all the time (Herzog, et al. 1989; Reeve et al. 2005; Rohlf & Bennett 2005).

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Susceptibility to euthanasia-related stress may be related to gender (although there is more within-gender than between-gender variation), attachment to animals and perceptions of euthanasia as performed for human convenience (Herzog, 2007; Matthews & Herzog, 1997; Rohlf & Bennett, 2005). Reactions to stressors can be cumulative but the experience of successfully managing stressors can lead to resilience, so there are no firm conclusions about whether experience sensitises or buffers against stress reactions. Other factors that can contribute to stress and grief include lack of relevant training, lack of social support, species being euthanised, euthanasia rates, practices, reasons and methods, employee workload and the personal evaluation of euthanasia as necessary and acceptable (Sanders 1995; Reeve et al. 2005; Rohlf & Bennett 2005). Frid & Perea 2007; Rogelberg et al. 2007b)

Coping with euthanasia-related stress

The broader literature on coping with work stress has identified many forms of coping (Folkman & Moskowitz 2004). With regards to coping with euthanasia, one coping strategy widely reported by staff is to emotionally separate themselves from their work (Herzog et al. 1989; Sanders 1995; Stafford et al. 1999). Emotional detachment can be learned and while it can be adaptive at least in the short term it may still be associated with stress and emotional exhaustion (Manette 2004). Other more adaptive coping strategies include using humour to reduce tension (Stafford et al. 1999) and managing the meaning of euthanasia. Staff often report recognising the importance of technical proficiency, becoming skilled and

gaining confidence that the euthanasia was done well, recognising that if they do not do it then others (who may not be as skilled) will be required to, and seeing euthanasia as a humane, necessary and important act (Rollin 1986; Sanders 1995; Stafford et al. 1999; Reeve et al. 2005; Leiser 2008).

The importance of supportive social relationships is also well recognised, although staff may find it difficult to find others who can listen without judging (Stafford et al. 1999). Important factors include the source of support (family, friends, peers, supervisors, companion animals), perception that support exists and, most importantly, satisfaction with support available (Rohlf & Bennett 2005). Staff need to recognise when it is appropriate to ask for help and acknowledge that stress, frustration or weariness are normal and acceptable reactions to demanding or draining work (Leiser 2008). Supportive supervision and peer relationships are associated with effective stress management, and can allow opportunities to examine stressful situations in a safe and confidential environment (Stafford et al. 1999). Professional psychological or counselling services can be valuable, and staff who decide to seek help will need to identify a counsellor or psychologist who understands compassion fatigue and is familiar with the demands of the work (Stafford et al. 1999). The broader literature around stress and coping identifies other strategies relevant to staff involved in euthanasia. The importance of good self-care is widely acknowledged including finding time for leisure activities, hobbies and relaxation (Stafford et al. 1999; Leiser 2008).

Organisational factors

An exclusive focus on individual reactions and coping risks ignoring the contexts in which people work. Effective coping can be helped or hindered by the organisational context in which work takes place. Larger organisations may have more social and financial resources to help employees including opportunities to adopt good human resource practices in staff selection. Effective selection strategies include the use of structured interviews, work samples and realistic job previews (Rogelberg et al., 2007b), appropriate training for new staff (Sanders 1995; Stafford et al. 1999; Martin et al. 2004) and ongoing support programmes. Mentoring by experienced staff can be valuable for those with less experience, provided that

mentors are appropriate role models and are trained and supported.

Other important factors include management supportiveness, counselling which should be available if required but never made compulsory, rotation of staff among different jobs and tasks, managing workload by having assistance available when required, taking breaks and time off, skills-based training, stress and coping seminars and initiatives that show appreciation of employees (Stafford et al., 1999; Rogelberg et al. 2007a; Leiser 2008). Other approaches that have been implemented include allowing staff to request more time when euthanising specific animals, working in pairs when euthanising, and having a choice about whether to be present with a specific animal when it is euthanised (Leiser 2008).

Effective communication about euthanasia and associated stress and other reactions is important. Feelings about euthanasia should be discussed openly, whether in formal staff meetings or informal support groups. Staff may find that discussion can help relieve stress and vent feelings as well as providing opportunities for exchange of ideas (Stafford et al. 1999; Rogelberg et al., 2007a). Some organisations have found specific initiatives helpful such as ritual or memorial services to acknowledge the use of animals and their contributions to excellence in research and teaching (Manette 2004), a prayer posted beside the animal crematorium or displaying photographs to acknowledge animals that have been there (Leiser 2008). Such initiatives will not be appropriate for all staff; organisations or cultures and ideas should be sought from and developed in consultation with staff to ensure that the approaches adopted are relevant and accepted.

Conclusion

Euthanasia can be associated with stress and grief in staff. These reactions are normal but it is important not to assume that they are inevitable. Effective individual coping strategies can build resilience provided that organisational culture and practices are supportive. Individuals may need to consider their role and the importance of their work, the meanings they place upon the tasks that they perform and the need to manage workloads and work-life balance. Organisations need to consider how they support the needs of staff through effective systems for selection, recruit-

ment, supervision, mentoring, training and ongoing support and development.

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