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Human attachment to dogs and cats and its ethical implications

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Keeping dogs and cats as companions in our homes gives rise to potential welfare problems and, relatedly, to important ethical questions. In the case of animal companions, unlike most forms of animal use, some problems are generated by human attachment: we can be so close to the animals that we mistake their needs for ours. Often the veterinarian will play an important role in advising owners about what's best for their animals' welfare.

This is especially the case when it comes to veterinary treatment of seriously ill companion animals. Many owners are willing to go to great lengths, and spend large sums of money, caring for their sick animal companions. As a result, difficult veterinary consultations may involve counselling owners to stop treatment of terminally ill animals (in contrast to previous decades, where vets more often had to discourage owners from euthanasing healthy companions). The human attachment to a companion animal can be strong and highly emotionally-charged, making it very difficult for some owners to consider the welfare of the animal when it comes to making decisions about treatment. Equally, professional, or financial, interests may motivate vets to recommend and undertake advanced investigations, or prolong treatments, even when the prognosis for the animal is poor.

In this presentation, which is largely based on Chs. 3 and 12 in Sandøe et al. (2016), we will first look into what is known about the human attachment to dogs, and then we will consider how human attachment affects the issue of how long to prolong the life of a sick animal.

Human attachment to dogs and cats

Companion dogs and cats are distinctive by virtue of their relationship with their human owners and other co-habitants. Although they may have other roles too, companion animals play a part in the personal and emotional lives of the humans with whom they live and interact. The relationship is often described using expressions such as “friends” or “family”, terms otherwise reserved for important relations between human beings.

The relationship between humans and companion animals is sometimes understood in terms of a special bond between the human and the animal; the “human-companion animal bond”. While it is very difficult to know how the companion animal experiences this bond, much more is known about how the human attaches to the companion animal.

A widely used approach to the characterization of the human-companion animal relation is the psychological framework of attachment. The concept of attachment was originally used to describe the degree of emotional bonding between an infant and its caregiver, and was later broadened to also include other types of human relationships including human-dog relationships.

One relationship model that has been used to study human attachment to dogs and cats is the Network of Relationships Inventory (NRI). In a study undertaken in Britain, 90 participants belonging to 40 households with dogs, cats and other companion animals were asked to fill out a questionnaire originally developed to measure relations between humans in their functions as family members, friends and the like (Bonas, McNicholas & Collis 2000). The study is interesting because it compares human-human and human-companion animal relations, and it looks at both positive and negative aspects of these relations. According to the study, dogs provide better support than humans in three ways: through more lasting relationships; as a better outlet for providing care for another individual; and as a better source of companionship. Cats do nearly as well in terms of providing the first two kinds of social support, but not in terms of companionship (described here as spending time or doing enjoyable things together). It is, however, important to note that only humans who choose to live with companion animals have been studied; and it's therefore not possible to say anything about whether those who choose to live *without* animals would have experienced similar benefits.



How human attachment affects end-of-life decisions

Given the strong attachment of many owners to their dogs and cats, decisions concerning the end of a companion's life are often difficult. And with advances in both human and veterinary medicine, concern is increasingly raised over whether prolongation of life at all costs is in the best interests of the patient. In the human case, as most countries do not currently permit active euthanasia or assisted suicide of people (the exceptions include the Netherlands and Switzerland), the most difficult decision in human end-of-life care usually involves the point at which transference from curative to palliative care is made. In veterinary medicine, where euthanasia of incurably ill animals is the norm, the difficult decision often involves deciding *when* to perform the euthanasia.

While different ethical interpretations of killing dogs and cats are highly significant in the case of healthy animals that could go on to have good lives, where an animal is undergoing severe pain and distress, with no possibility of relief, virtually every ethical view converges to agree that euthanasia is either acceptable, desirable, or morally required (on many of these views, this is also true of humans in similar states).

However, in practice, decisions about euthanasia can be difficult, and may come either in some sense "too soon", while an animal has good life left to live with palliative care, or "too late", when suffering has become intense, and quality of life is very poor. This may be due to a lack of knowledge, given the difficulty involved in judging how much an animal is suffering based largely on its behaviour and on medical tests. But other factors may also be significant. Owners may prefer to euthanase an animal sooner rather than later to spare themselves the distress of watching their companion deteriorating, even if the animal's quality of life could be good with palliative care.

Conversely, some owners may want to keep animals alive even when palliative care is no longer providing the animal with an adequate quality of life. When the animal is considered a member of the family, making the decision to end its life can be a very distressing, complex and protracted process, often described by owners as the hardest thing they have ever had to do. Because the decision is so difficult and the emotions involved intense, owners may delay euthanasia, then subsequently feel guilty and express regret at having been unable to make the decision sooner.

Surveys of veterinarians and veterinary students reported that one of the most stressful situations to which they were commonly exposed was witnessing the

prolongation of an animal's suffering when an owner was unable to accept that it could not be cured.

Such cases are obviously very difficult for vets, since the patient's interests appear to be in conflict with the client's interests, and the vet is being paid by the client. Vets may take different ethical perspectives, focusing only on the impact on the human client, only on the interests of the companion animal, or attempting to take into account the interests of the owner, the companion animal, other family members, as well as their own interests. Treating severely ill and dying animals often has an emotional cost to the vet as well as the owner, for example when they are unable to relieve suffering (due to the nature of the illness, or emotional or financial constraints placed on them by the owner), or have to perform euthanasia.

In conclusion, the strong attachment that many people have to their companion animals becomes more complex when the animal becomes ill, or the owner has to make decisions about ending the animal's life. This may be a time when the interests of the owner, the animal and the vet are not fully compatible. Different ethical perspectives will view these possible conflicts of interest differently, but on most ethical views, it is the *quality*, rather than the quantity, of the animal's life that is of the greatest ethical significance.

Bonas, S., McNicholas, J. & Collis, G. (2000). Pets in the network of family relationships: an empirical study. In: Podberscek, A., Paul, E.S. & Serpell, J.A. (eds) *Companion animals and us: exploring the relationships between people & pets*. Cambridge UK, Cambridge University Press, pp. 209-236.

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