

Your Pet Has Died... Now What Happens?

By George Cuellar, DVM, Diplomate ABVP C/F

While euthanasia is difficult, it is only the first decision that needs to be made. Now what happens? The disposition of remains needs to be considered. There are many myths and concerns regarding pet disposition. This is a tough subject to broach and full of very emotional considerations. This is best thought through and decided before the actual euthanasia. There is a lot of information online both true and untrue. Basically, there are four ways to consider; rendering, cremation, burial, and what I like to call “the fringe”.

Most euthanized pets from the city shelters and those without owners are rendered. Rendering is a process that converts animal tissue into stable, value-added source materials. Rendering refers to processing of animal products into more useful materials like purified fats such as lard or tallow. This happens to be the most “green” way to go. Rendering is akin to any type of recycling. Now while it is hard to think of a loved pet as “recyclable”, it is important to distinguish between the essence of a loved pet and the body of said pet. Rendering companies usually pick up and process fat and bone trimmings, inedible meat scraps, blood, feathers, and dead animals from farms, ranches, feedlots, animal shelters, restaurants, butchers, and markets. Almost all of the resulting ingredients from rendering are source material destined for nonhuman consumption. Such source materials are used in a number of products that many people do not associate with pets. These include soap, toothpaste, mouthwash, hair dyes, nail polish, photographic film, crayons, glue, solvents, shoe polish, toys, anti-freeze, ornaments, pharmaceutical products and cosmetics (including those not tested on animals). The question is, do some of these pets end up in pet food? The answer is technically “yes”. However, a 2000 FDA study testing pet food for cat or dog DNA was negative. Ingredient labels are regulated by FDA and most ingredients on pet food labels have a corresponding definition in the AAFCO Official Publication. For example, “meat” is defined as the “clean flesh of slaughtered mammals and is limited to...the striate muscle...with or without the accompanying and overlying fat and the portions of the skin.” On the other hand, “meat meal” is “the rendered product from mammal tissues.” Thus any “meat meal” ingredient on a pet food label could also contain parts of animals one would not think of as “meat.” So to avoid rendered products in pet food avoid the term “meat meal” and “chicken meal” on the label.

Cremation is very straightforward and is what we do at our hospital. Cremation creates cremains or ashes. There are basically two ways to do cremation, one is publically and one is privately. Private cremation is individualized per pet. Pets are cremated singly and cremains are collected and returned to owners. There are a variety of companies that do this and most veterinarians will have a company they work with. The second way is communal cremation. This is where pets are cremated together and their cremains are usually spread somewhere in nature. Our current provider spreads cremains in the ocean.

Burial is the fastest growing ancillary pet business in the United States. BusinessWeek reported on this emerging market segment in the pet industry with “There's Never Been A Better Time to Be a Dead Pet” by Eric Spitznagel, Sep 07 2012. The article suggests that the pet death segment is on their list of best pet business opportunities for the second year straight. The aging of America, and of our pets, and increased spending, are some of the reasons for this growth. Nobody is able to pinpoint the exact demographic responsible for the industry’s financial boom. Some pet funeral directors point to baby boomers, which have increasingly turned to pets for companionship after their spouses die or their children leave home. But pet funerals in recent years have been purchased just as often by people in their 20s and 30s, many of whom opted not to become parents and treat their pets as surrogate children. “You really can’t put your finger on it;” says Ed Martin Jr., the director of Hartsdale Pet Cemetery and Crematory in Hartsdale, N.Y. “I used to think this was something for older women who never had children. Or very wealthy people. But we get everybody: men, women, rich, poor, young, old.” I get asked all the time if pets can be buried in the back yard and the answer, like many other cities, is no. In Los Angeles, it is illegal to bury an animal except in an established cemetery, [no dead animal or fowl may be buried in the City of Los Angeles except in an established cemetery. (LAMC 53.62)]. Outside the city limits, however, people are permitted to bury animals as long as they are at least three feet deep and do not

constitute a public nuisance. In this area Los Angeles Pet Memorial Park, located in Calabasas, is the nearest pet cemetery.

Then there are those “fringe” services that vary from weird to creepy. There is taxidermy, freeze-drying, and or mummification. If there’s an unorthodox way of memorializing a deceased loved one, it’s probably being sold to pet owners. For instance, the company LifeGem, uses the carbonized ashes from cremated human remains to create synthetic diamonds (prices run from \$2,490 to \$25,000). This wasn’t originally intended for animals but not long after LifeGem opened for business in 2002, the calls and e-mails started to flood in. Pet owners were incensed that LifeGem did not offer this service for pets, too. They started doing this service for pet owners and now, despite not directly marketing its services to pet owners, pets currently account for 25 percent of LifeGem’s business. *The bottom line is when you are faced with this last decision to make regarding your pet, discuss your options with your veterinarian so you can be assured your decision will be carried out according to your wishes*

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