

How to Know When It's Time to Say Goodbye to Your Pet

This may be the most difficult question you'll ever have to answer during your pet's lifetime, and the right answer depends on many factors. Just as quality of life matters for your dog or cat, so does a good quality death. This source can help provide the answers and support you need.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Our guest today is veterinarian Dr. Dani McVety, founder and CEO of Lap of Love Veterinary Hospice and In-Home Euthanasia
- Dr. McVety found her calling to help pets (and their humans) with end-of-life care while working as an emergency medicine veterinarian; she recognized that providing dying pets with hospice care and/or euthanasia was the best way to offer a good quality death at the end of a good quality life
- Lap of Love has 250 veterinarians in 36 states and a total team of almost 500, many of whom provide phone support and teleadvice to pet parents looking for help, answers and guidance
- Many people with pets who are terminally ill are confused and concerned about the right time to seek veterinary hospice care or euthanasia; thankfully, "Knowing when it's time is what we do," says Dr. McVety

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Our guest today is veterinarian Dr. Dani McVety, founder and CEO of Lap of Love Veterinary Hospice and In-Home Euthanasia, which has a network of vets throughout the U.S. Dr. McVety started Lap of Love shortly after graduating from veterinary school, while practicing emergency medicine in her hometown of Tampa, FL.

After helping countless families through the loss of their pet, she felt immense inspiration to combine her previous experience as a human hospice volunteer with her love of people and a desire to make the experience of losing a pet as peaceful as it can possibly be.

Below are some of the highlights of our discussion, but I encourage you to watch the full interview above for much more detail and information.

A Calling to Help Pets at the End of Their Lives

Dr. McVety explains that when she started her veterinary career, she never dreamed it would eventually take her to Lap of Love.

"I wanted to be a veterinarian from the time I imagined what I would be doing with my life," she says. "It was the only job I could think of in which I could bring my dog to work, so that's how I picked it! So, I pretty much worked my butt off through high school, college, and vet school, and one day I crossed that finish line and became a veterinarian, which was amazing."

Dr. McVety began her career in emergency medicine because she loved the fast pace. One night, fresh out of vet school, when she'd been at the hospital only about a week, she took a call from a woman who had a 120-pound German shepherd she couldn't get into the car to bring him to the hospital. The woman asked if someone could come to her, instead, but the practice didn't do home calls, so they coached the woman on how to get her dog into her car using a sheet.

The poor lady showed up around an hour and a half later, and sadly, her dog was elderly and in bad shape, and the decision was made to euthanize him. In addition, the dog had bitten her on the hand, not because he was aggressive, but because he'd been in pain as she struggled to get him into her car. The woman had to go from the veterinary ER to the human ER to get the bite treated. This sad situation planted a seed with Dr. McVety.

"As I grew as an emergency clinician, I met a lot of people who came into the hospital on a Friday night with a pet at the end of life," she explains. "We all knew what was coming, but I also knew we didn't have to euthanize that day. We could do it on Saturday, or in a few days or in a week."

As a veterinarian, I know how to keep pets out of pain, and calm while their families take time to prepare. To me, that was hospice care, and it just sort of evolved.

The amazing thing was that I loved being able to offer that to people. Most people wonder how hospice and euthanasia vets can do what they do. They assume it's a terrible and depressing way to spend our time. And my answer is always, 'No, this work is very fulfilling to me.'"

To Date, Lap of Love Is in 36 States

When Dr. McVety started what would become Lap of Love, she worked alone, doing hospice and euthanasia house calls during her free time away from the ER. She had volunteered for human hospice during her college years and applied many of the philosophies and practices she learned during that time to her work with pets and their families.

For example, she wasn't afraid to use certain medications at a very high dose for hospice animals in terrible pain who would be euthanized soon.

Client interest in Dr. McVety's approach and the services she provided for end-of-life pets really caught on in the Tampa Bay area and continued to expand. Within six or eight months, while still working in emergency medicine in addition to her hospice work, she began getting calls from veterinarians around the country interested in what she was doing. However, once they learned all the details involved in starting their own similar practice, they balked.

Dr. McVety saw an opportunity to take the foundation she'd already laid out, including her brochure and website, both of which she wrote and designed herself, and offer other veterinarians the tools to start their own mobile practice. She recruited a vet school classmate who had been a software designer in her first career to help her scale up and bring other doctors onboard.

"The thing that has surprised me the most about this work is that other doctors love it too," says Dr. McVety.

Today, Lap of Love has nearly 250 veterinarians in 36 states and a total team of almost 500. Many on the team answer the phones when pet owners call, and are often retired vets or veterinary nurses, along with those who are no longer able to handle the physical demands of the job.

'How Do We Know When It's Time?'

This question is foremost in the minds of so many pet parents, and as Dr. McVety explains, "Knowing when it's time is what we do."

"That's why we're called Lap of Love Veterinary Hospice and In-Home Euthanasia," she explains. "It's not just euthanasia. We're available for people when they don't know what else to do, and they need some guidance. Probably the most important question we answer as veterinarians is, 'How do I know when it's time to say goodbye?'"

There are many things that factor into decisions about the right time to euthanize a pet. The disease the animal has is obviously one consideration, as is the pet's size. A Mastiff with advanced arthritis requires very different care than a tiny Chihuahua with the same issue, simply because a small dog or a cat is much easier to manage and physically support than a large or giant breed dog.

If the disease process involves, for example, the heart or lungs or the brain, "Those organs work until the second that they don't, it's a cliff," says Dr. McVety. "Once they start going downhill, it's fast, and you may not even have time to get an in-home doctor to help give your pet a peaceful death experience."

"Quality of death is something we talk about a lot at Lap of Love. Quality of life is what happens in general veterinary practice, but when the end is near, we're there to help your pet have a good quality death.

We talk to our clients about that. Do you want to get into the car and rush to the emergency room because you waited till the last minute? Do you want to eke out every last moment you possibly can, knowing that you're risking a trip to the emergency room at two o'clock in the morning? I started Lap of Love so you don't have to do that.

Wouldn't you rather have an experience, for example, where your entire family is on the beach at sunset, and your dog is wrapped in a fluffy towel, surrounded by his family and candles? Everyone says their good-byes, says a prayer, and we deliver medication that helps your dog peacefully drift off to sleep. We make that possible, but we can't wait till the last moment.

The way I explain it to people is, there's a subjective period of time when euthanasia is a good decision. It may not be your only choice, but it's a good decision. After this period of time, it's an emergency room trip, and that's not a very peaceful decision.

Some people choose to push as far as possible, risking the ER trip. Others have said good-bye multiple times, and they know they don't want it to end that way. They want to make the decision at the beginning. People who've been on a very long emotional roller coaster in the past often don't want to do it again. They say good-bye sooner."

Sometimes pets die naturally. We wake up in the morning or come home from work or school, and a dog or cat has passed during our absence.

"When that happens to people, I want them to understand it's a natural process of life," says Dr. McVety.

"Sometimes Mother Nature intervenes, regardless of whatever decision you've made about euthanasia. I always let people know, especially people who are having a really hard time with the decision to euthanize, that it's possible the decision will be made for them by nature. And there's a blessing in not having to make the decision."

Finding Hospice and End-of-Life Care Support

Dr. McVety believes the best time to reach out for hospice care for a pet is when your veterinarian says there's nothing more he or she can do, or perhaps suggests retreating with the same approach that didn't help the first time around.

"That's the point at which you can let your vet know that you don't want to continue down the same road; that you're looking for a different philosophy of care," says Dr. McVety.

"That's when it's time to reach out to a hospice vet, or to ask for guidance from your own vet if he or she is involved with hospice care. Many veterinarians can't do in-home euthanasia because it requires that they exit their practice, which is very expensive. However, they may still be very helpful in guiding you through the process of hospice care."

One online resource built specifically for pet owners with end-of-life animal companions is the **Lap of Love** site. It's loaded with content and answers to the questions caregivers have when they're up at two 'clock in the morning worrying about their pet and searching for information.

"We have information on the top 25 diseases that we've seen in the pets of the 300,000 families we've helped," she explains.

"We know the questions you're going to ask. We have videos and articles you can access, and I encourage everyone to take a look at those. Of course, if you feel your pet doesn't have much time left, you can certainly give us a call.

We have an awesome team to help answer questions, and we also have doctors on our teleadvice line who can talk in-depth with callers about quality-of-life issues, such as the disease process, pet personalities and temperaments, and owners' wishes for end-of-life care."

To learn more about in-home hospice care and euthanasia, and to find out if there are veterinarians in your area, you can visit the Lap of Love site linked above or their **Facebook** page.