

# Euthanasia Emphasis

## in US Veterinary Tech Schools

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**E**uthanasia can be a rather sensitive subject to many individuals, clients of veterinary professionals, and the veterinary team alike. With increased attention in recent years given to the human-animal bond, the emotional complexity of animals, and the focus on veterinary wellness, the importance of a good death has certainly come into focus. The euthanasia appointment is no longer an unpleasant burden in forward-thinking veterinary practices, but a chance for connectiveness and intimacy in the veterinary profession. Though sad and heartbreaking, euthanasia can lead to a personal satisfaction when performed well. With love at the heart of the veterinary profession, peace can be found, even when life is lost.<sup>1</sup>

Good euthanasia is now beyond the “one step” of giving an injection; rather, it evolves around the right time, compassionate staff, and skillful techniques, with family gathered around. The emphasis today is toward ensuring that the pet’s last moments are comfortable and peaceful, not just “getting the job done.” There are no “do-overs” to euthanasia, thus it is worth doing right. A good death is achieved by advocating for the safest method for the pet, for what is most meaningful for the caregiver, and what will nourish the veterinary team, according Kathleen Cooney.<sup>1</sup> The

American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) Guidelines for the Euthanasia of Animals document<sup>2</sup> highlights the significance of proper technique choices and the ethical considerations to be considered.

What is the role of the veterinary tech professional in the euthanasia process? These professionals play an integral role in making the euthanasia process as stress-free and smooth-lined as possible for both the client and the veterinarian.<sup>3</sup> Clients will rely on the knowledge and compassion of the vet tech person to give information in helping to make the right decision regarding euthanasia. Additionally, the veterinarian will depend on the vet tech for assistance before, during and after the euthanasia process, observes Amanda Jondle. Currently, 10 states allow vet techs to perform euthanasia with or without the veterinarian present. Nine states indicate the technician may perform euthanasia if the veterinarian is on site and able to assist should the need arise.<sup>4</sup> Either situation requires the veterinarian to “prescribe” euthanasia as the best medical procedure for the patient given its physical and mental health. The veterinary technician cannot decide to perform euthanasia without a veterinarian’s consent. Some 26 states do not allow veterinary technicians to perform euthanasia outside of shelters, as veterinarians are the primary

facilitators in performing euthanasia procedures on animals. In animal shelters, however, euthanasia technicians with advanced training may perform euthanasia for shelter animals only.<sup>5</sup>

The method of euthanasia is somewhat standard across the 50 states, with most states authorizing the injection of sodium pentobarbital or a similar agent. Some states, however, allow the use of carbon monoxide chambers, often mandating that the animals must be of a certain age. Several states have enacted laws on “emergency” euthanasia, whereby if deemed to be dangerous, injured, or sick beyond treatment, law enforcement officers, animal control agents, veterinarians, or other designated persons may shoot or otherwise euthanize an animal in an emergency.<sup>5</sup>

The objective of this study is to determine how US veterinary tech programs are preparing students to deal with euthanasia of an animal. As noted above, veterinary technicians are pivotal members of the euthanasia team, though normally working with a veterinarian, not actually performing the procedure. It is our hope that the results of this study can help various vet tech programs to learn from each other and thus benefit. As anthropologists note, 90 percent of what we learn comes from diffusion, not invention. This study will hopefully reveal



best practices regarding euthanasia of animals, thus allowing vet tech programs to adjust their own programs accordingly.

### Methods

Following approval by the IRB at the College of Charleston (Exemption for Protocol IRB-2019-09-23-125958), a survey was electronically mailed, using Qualtrics, to the 192 veterinary tech schools in the United States in the fall of 2019. Then in the spring of 2020, a follow-up postal service mailing occurred. The addresses of the vet tech programs were obtained from the Veterinary Technology Programs Accredited by the AVMA Committee on Veterinary Technician Education and Activities.<sup>6</sup> Mailings included the cover letter which explained the purpose of the study, the survey, and a self-addressed, stamped envelope for return with the postal mailings. Questions on the survey included methods of euthanasia taught for various animals, number of hours devoted in the core curriculum to euthanasia methods and techniques, which professionals taught the methodologies, how the teachers were selected, whether euthanasia facilitation is considered a core competency for graduates, percentage of students who perform, or are present for, an actual euthanasia during their education, if students are taught to understand how euthanasia drugs accomplish death, and expected physical changes during euthanasia, made aware of euthanasia impact on clients, whether schools use a Quality of Life Scale, if taught ways to increase safety and comfort for patients, encouraged to familiarize themselves with euthanasia standards of various professional groups, knowledge taught regarding euthanasia, whether a death-fear test is given, provided option of

**TABLE 1. Methods of Euthanasia Taught with Respect to Various Species (in percentages)**

Method	Dogs	Cats	Horses	Livestock	Exotics
Intravenous	96	96	80	60	65
Intracardiac	61	63	3		68
Intrahepatic	8	6	0	0	11
Intrarenal	3	17	0	0	8
Intraperitoneal	26	28	0	0	68
Gunshot	2	2	35	38	0
Captive Bolt	0	0	17	56	0
Anesthetic	11	11	3	5	67
Oral Admin	0	0	0	0	0

N = 45

animal hospice information, workshops on euthanasia encouraged after graduation, and whether euthanasia-related education is offered outside of the curriculum.

### Findings

The response rate to the electronic survey yielded a low return, even after a follow-up mailing via postal services. Thirty-five surveys were returned from the electronic mailings to the 192 veterinary tech schools and 10 from the postal mailing (10 out of 157). Obviously during a pandemic is not the time to send a postal mailing of a survey to academics! Overall, the return rate was 23.4 percent. Although disappointing, such a low rate is not surprising, given the dramatic reduction in survey response rates in recent years.<sup>7</sup>

Method of euthanasia most frequently taught for dogs, cats, horses, livestock and exotics was intravenous (*Table 1*). Also, a popular method for dogs, cats, and exotics was intracardiac. Two other frequently used methods for exotics were intraperitoneal and anesthetic gas. Captive bolt and gunshot were used primarily for livestock and horses.

Average number of hours devoted in the core curriculum to euthanasia methods and techniques (separate from training relating to client communication and ethical decision-making) was 3.74.

As to the background of the teachers who taught euthanasia methodology, they were veterinarians and veterinary technicians (96 percent and 84 percent, respectively). When asked how the teachers were selected, answers included DVM-based (thus the teachers simply followed those guidelines), taught in a variety of courses (the teacher of a particular course would then teach it), personal interest in that topic, licensed and experienced professionals, and based on clinical knowledge and experience.

Euthanasia facilitation is not considered a core competency for veterinary tech graduates for 63 percent of the programs. In the 45 vet tech schools responding, almost half (49%) reported that more than two-thirds of their students perform, or are present for, an actual euthanasia during their education. For the other schools, the number of students experiencing such was less than two-thirds. Therefore, most vet tech students are having some exposure to the methodology of euthanasia. If students do not have an opportunity to perform euthanasia, however, the question was asked as to the educational guarantee implemented to ensure that they understand how to perform such a procedure. As numerous respondents stated, euthanasia is not an essential skill for CVTEA, as most states require that a veterinarian perform



euthanasia. Others noted how students understood the process, as noted in *Sidebar 1*. In some vet tech programs students participate in preparation of sedation and IV catheterization and have exposure in

## SIDEBAR 1. If Students Do Not Perform Euthanasia, What Guarantee Is Implemented to Ensure They Understand How to Perform Such a Procedure?

1. Euthanasia not a task for vet tech students
2. Observe euthanasia, thus knowledge gained
3. Lectures, reading, quizzes, discussion—learning didactic skills
4. View videos
5. Participate to some extent
6. Required to understand how euthanasia is performed
7. Simulated models used
8. Practice on deceased patients
9. Practicum experience
10. Taught IV catheterization and sedation
11. May Have opportunity to perform at a clinical site
12. Taught theory and methods
13. Proficient in blood draws

clinical rotation.

Certain skills and knowledge regarding euthanasia taught in vet tech programs revealed that overwhelmingly programs so emphasized (*Table 2*). All or nearly all programs emphasize how euthanasia drugs work, physical reactions to the procedure, impact on the client, use Quality of Life Scales, taught safety, and encouraged to be familiar with euthanasia standards of various groups.

Only one of 45 vet tech school administers any sort of death-fear test to determine the anxiety of students regarding death. Animal hospice is an option discussed in 73 percent of the vet tech schools responding. Fifty-one percent of vet tech schools encourage/provide workshops/orientation/continuing education on euthanasia outside of the curriculum. This euthanasia emphasis includes a local hospice, at-home euthanasia veterinarian guest lecture, speakers from the Vet Tech Club, talk from a licensed social worker, local animal crematorium sponsored CE credits on euthanasia, mental health faculty working with students on euthanasia counseling, ongoing CE for license renewal, veterinary conferences, and CE opportunities on grief counseling.

## Discussion

Though a less than 25 percent return rate, we can draw some conclusions from our data. The most frequently taught method of euthanasia in US veterinary tech schools is intravenous (much like US veterinary schools, according to

unpublished data by the authors). Because veterinary technicians do not typically perform euthanasia, as do veterinarians, it is thus not considered a core competency for veterinary tech graduates, according to most of the schools responding. However, vet tech schools receive nearly four hours regarding euthanasia methods and techniques to prepare them to assist veterinarians. Interestingly, veterinary schools provide on average 2.8 hours of euthanasia methodology preparation, according to yet unpublished data by the authors. Nonetheless, most vet tech students are experiencing exposure to the methodology of euthanasia.

Nearly three-fourths of vet tech programs present animal hospice as an option to euthanasia to their students. A slight majority of programs also encourage additional education on euthanasia beyond vet tech school through CEs and other opportunities. Thus, euthanasia and hospice are included in the education of most vet tech students. Overall, the vet tech schools reporting tend to give their students exposure to euthanasia methodology and ways to assist their clients, veterinarians, and the animal being euthanized.

The majority (82 percent) of reporting vet tech schools encourage the use of Quality of Life Scales as an assessment tool in euthanasia-related decision-making. Quality of life is important for pets and people alike. As Sara Said<sup>8</sup> observes, quality of life scales, such as the HHHHHMM scale from Dr. Alice

**TABLE 2. Information Taught to Vet Tech Students (in percentages)**

Material Taught	Yes	No
Required to understand how euthanasia drugs accomplish death	98	2
Taught the expected physical changes during the euthanasia procedure (death)	100	0
Aware of the impact euthanasia might have on clients	100	0
Encouraged to use Quality of Life Scales as an assessment tool in euthanasia-related decision-making	82	18
Taught ways to increase safety and comfort for patients during euthanasia	100	0
Encouraged to familiarize themselves with euthanasia standards of groups such as the AVMA, AAHA, IAAHPC, or CAETA	78	22

N = 45



Villalobos for dogs and cats help evaluate the seven criteria to assist in decision-making for the final call. Veterinary personnel should feel honored that they are serving society's needs by offering decision-making and counseling to help pet owners through this emotional and difficult time, notes Said.


Only one of the responding veterinary tech schools offers a death fear test to determine the degree of death fear/anxiety which veterinary tech students may experience. A death fear test could be given to entering vet tech students, however, then to exiting students to determine if death anxiety went up or down during their tenure. There are various death fear scales which could be utilized. Some medical schools incorporate death orientation for first-year students prior to beginning gross anatomy laboratory to help reduce any anxiety which may exist. Veterinary tech schools might consider such an initiative regarding euthanasia procedures. If indeed, death fear was high with entering vet tech students, the programs might want to address this concern. Such a lessening of death anxiety would likely enhance the veterinary technicians' ability to relate to their clients when euthanasia of a pet occurred.

Though vet tech professionals primarily "assist" with euthanasia, they play a pivotal role in making the euthanasia process as stress-free as possible for all concerned. The goal of veterinary professionals is to ease the animal's suffering and to keep the pet's comfort and quality of life at the forefront. As veterinarian Amanda Jondle<sup>3</sup> notes regarding veterinary technician's role in euthanasia, at some point the move is from ensuring a quality of life to ensuring a quality of death. Suggestions by Dr. Jondle for veterinary technicians to assist include providing information ahead of time to the client, prepare the room (clean bedding, soft lighting, background sounds such as music, waterfalls), and prepare

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the paperback. During the appointment, the vet technician can assist in getting the pet and client from their vehicle, going over the paperwork, talk about payment, expectations during the procedure by assisting the veterinarian in getting an accessible vein, for example, and after the procedure allow the clients to stay longer with the pet if they choose, talk about any memorial items, remove the body from the room and prepare for final disposition whatever the will of the client, then prepare a sympathy card, signed by the staff, to send to the client.

With euthanasia of animals having numerous methodologies available, the topic of euthanasia should be of utmost significance to veterinary technicians. Primarily assisting veterinarians in euthanasia, however, it is important that veterinary technicians be well trained in their role in relating to both the animal and the client. Knowing the procedures and being knowledgeable regarding their interaction with the client is most important. With proper preparation in veterinary tech schools, these graduates will go out into their profession and make a most positive impact on their clients. According to Kathleen Cooney of the Companion Animal Euthanasia Training Academy (CAETA), the growing request for home euthanasia and the known

shortage of mobile veterinarians has left veterinary teams unable to fulfill the number of requests for such services. In states allowing veterinary technicians to perform euthanasia, their services can help an increased number of patients. Veterinary technicians well trained in euthanasia could fill the gap. Finally, feeling comfortable with one's own interaction, the veterinary tech professional will feel good about self and know that she/he is making a difference in the lives of others, thus producing a feeling of integrity and senescence. 

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