

# How Do Pet Owners Define a ‘Good Death’?

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As a small animal practitioner, chances are that you perform euthanasia frequently. It is a gift you are able to offer your clients and patients to relieve pain and suffering. Yet, even though it is part of your job and a common procedure, it is not easy.<sup>1</sup> Euthanasia encompasses both medical and emotional components beyond just the procedure itself, and these aspects factor into both animal welfare and the emotional experience of all involved.<sup>2</sup> Yet, despite the impact and potential effects that euthanasia can have on veterinary professionals and pet owners,<sup>3-5</sup> the associated emotional strain is seldomly acknowledged or discussed.<sup>6-8</sup>

As we all know, the decision to euthanize is often a difficult one, with many pet owners requiring extra care and support during this time.<sup>9</sup> It is no wonder that many veterinarians find end-of-life conversations even more stressful than the actual euthanasia procedure.<sup>1</sup> And, while much

has been written about end of life conversations, much less is known about owners' preferences when it comes to the actual procedure.

What we do know is that owners' perceptions of euthanasia encompass all aspects—from the pre-euthanasia appointment to after-death body care—and each element impacts their perception of a 'good death'. This means that the medical aspects of the euthanasia procedure are only a part of what is important to pet owners.

So, how *do* pet owners define a 'good' euthanasia? What factors are important to them?

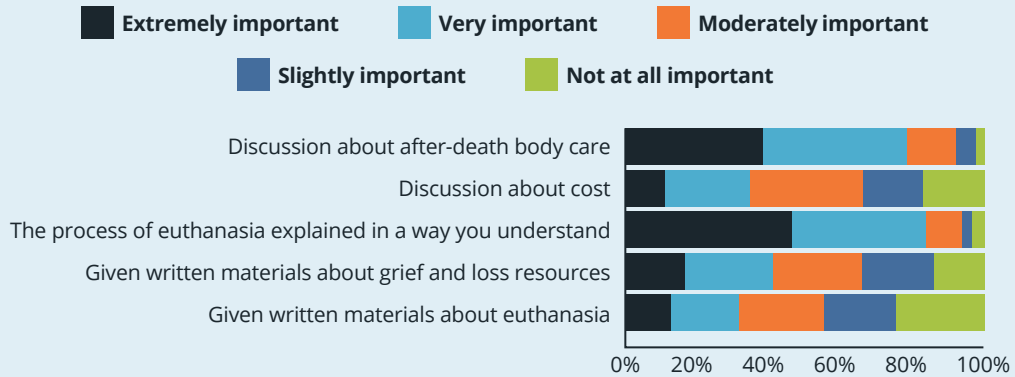
To help answer this question, I partnered with Companion Animal Euthanasia Training Academy (CAETA) to distribute an anonymous, online survey to pet owners between December 2021 and January 2022. The final sample consisted of 1578 primarily white, college-educated, female pet owners. We learned, through a series of questions pertaining to elements of the euthanasia procedure (before, during and after), what factors matter most to pet owners when assessing their euthanasia experience. I want to share with you what we learned.

## Preplanning

We first asked about preplanning; do owners have a more positive experience if they have time to plan? We found the answer is yes: owners were more likely to report a positive experience if they had at least one day to prepare (66%) versus if it was an emergency (33%). In fact, the more time owners had to prepare, the more likely they were to report a positive experience.

In addition, owners who had a pre-euthanasia appointment were more likely to report

**Graph 1. Most Important Pre-euthanasia Appointment Factors**

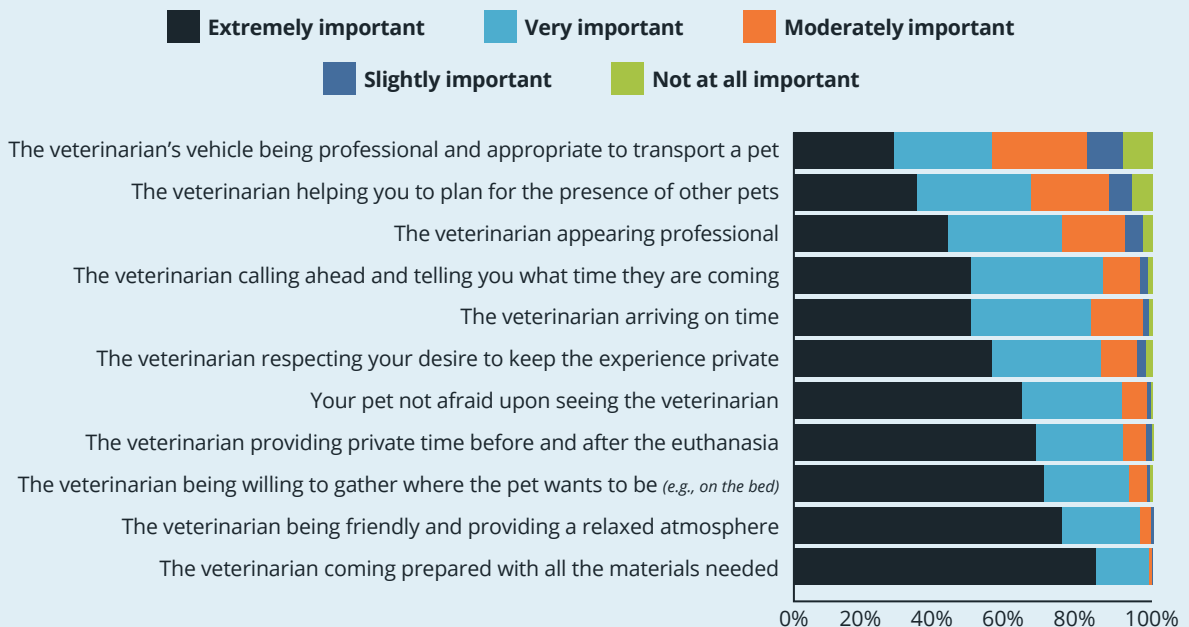


experiencing a good experience than those who did not (69% vs. 59%). In particular, the procedure explained in a way they understood and talking about after-death body care were the pre-euthanasia appointment factors they found most important—more than receiving written information or talking about the cost. **(Graph 1)**

Next, we wondered how owners’ experiences with in-home euthanasia compared to

euthanasia performed in a hospital. We found that owners were much more likely to report having a positive experience if the euthanasia was performed at home (80%) compared to a veterinary hospital (43%). Given the growing popularity of in-home euthanasia services,<sup>10</sup> we felt it would be helpful to know what elements of at-home euthanasia are seen as most important. We found owners want veterinarians to come prepared with all the materials they need, be

**Graph 2. Most Important In-home Euthanasia Factors**



friendly and provide a relaxed atmosphere, be willing to gather where the pet wants to be (e.g., on the bed) and provide private time before and after the euthanasia. **(Graph 2)**

## Sedatives

Many veterinarians administer a sedative prior to euthanasia. But does this matter to clients? In short, yes. We found that owners were much more likely to be satisfied with the euthanasia when their pet was given a sedative prior to euthanasia (62%) compared to not receiving a sedative (31%). When asked about the time between the sedative and euthanasia injection, we found that owners feel longer is better. For example, while 52% of those who reported there was less than a minute between the time of sedation and euthanasia felt it was a positive experience, this number jumped to 64% when the time between sedation and euthanasia injection was more than three minutes. In fact, ratings stayed high (64%) even when the time between sedation and euthanasia injection was more than 20 minutes. This is good news. It means that even when something happens, and the time between sedation and the euthanasia injection is longer than you planned, it does not necessarily mean that the owner will have a negative perception.

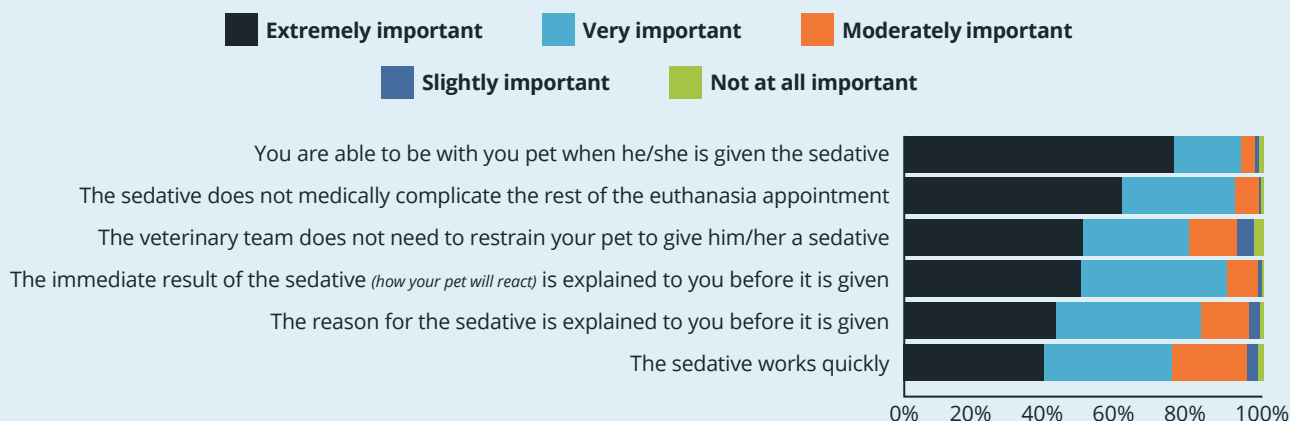
What *is* important to owners when it comes to sedation is that they are able to be with their pet when they are given the sedative, that the sedative does not medically complicate the rest of the procedure, that the veterinary team does not need to restrain their pet and that the impact of the sedative is explained to them before it is given. **(Graph 3)**

## Euthanasia Procedure

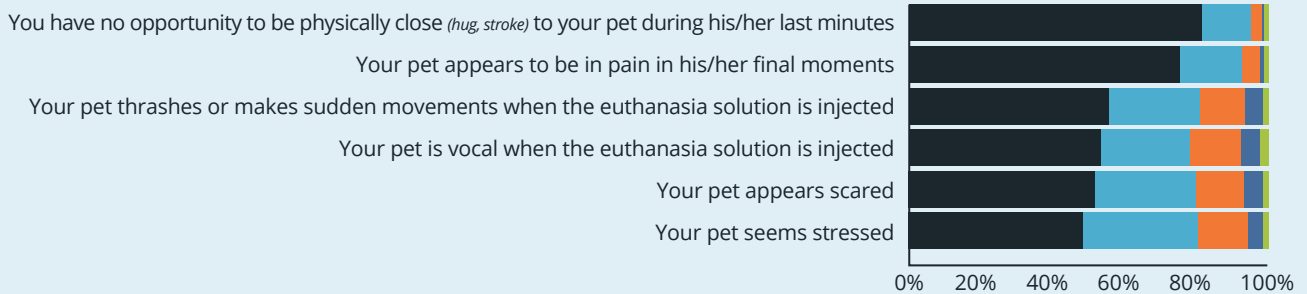
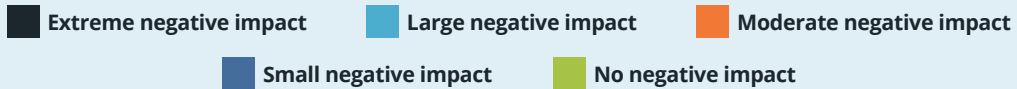
The survey next shifted to questions about the euthanasia procedure itself. We were interested in the aspects of the procedure that have the largest negative impact on owners' perceptions. We found that owners were very concerned about not having an opportunity to be physically close to the pet during their last minutes, if their pet appeared to be in pain in their final moments, if their pet was thrashing or vocalizing when the euthanasia solution was injected or if their pet appeared scared or stressed. **(Graph 4)**

In addition, we found some important things to avoid. These included not allowing owners to be with the pet during the entire procedure, hearing distressed sounds from their pet when out of sight or appearing to be in distress when their pet is returned to the

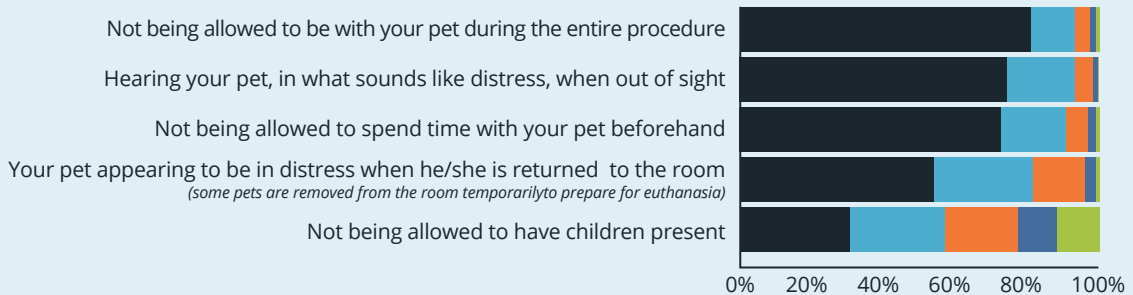
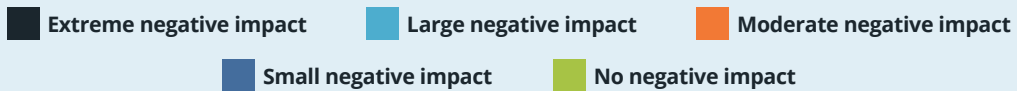
**Graph 3. Most Important Sedation Factors**



### Graph 4. Most Important Euthanasia Procedure Factors



### Graph 5. Factors to Avoid During a Euthanasia Procedure



room and not being allowed to spend time with their pet beforehand. (Graph 5)

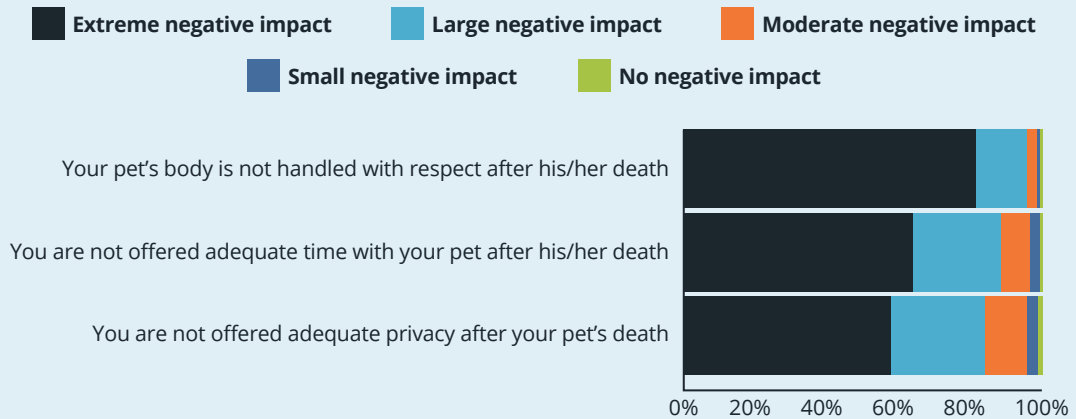
It is worth noting that what was *not* important to owners was whether the death went as fast as they expected, or if the veterinary team had to deviate from the plan but explained what was going on.

### Body Care

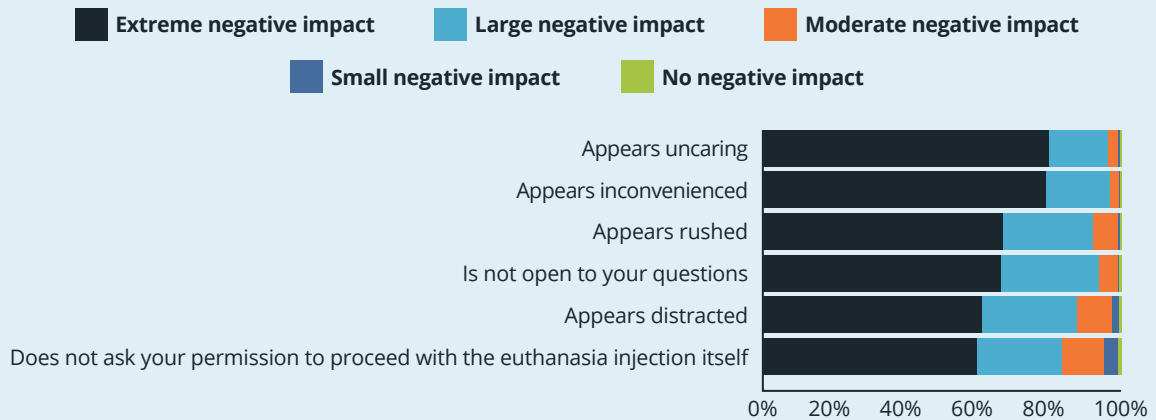
We know from previous studies that owners clearly care about after-death body care<sup>11</sup>. Our results validated that they want to feel



**Graph 6. Most Important After-death Body Care Factors**



**Graph 7. Most Important Veterinary Team Factors**



their pet's body is handled with respect after death, and feel it important that they are given adequate time and privacy with their pet after his/her death. **(Graph 6)**

So, given these results, what is the bottom line? What can you do to ensure your clients feel their euthanasia experience is a positive one?

**Here are some concrete suggestions:**

### Veterinary Team

Our last set of questions pertained to the veterinary team. As we know, euthanasia is a team effort. It was no surprise that owners who felt their veterinary team was uncaring, inconvenienced, rushed, distracted or unwilling to answer their questions were more likely to view the experience negatively. **(Graph 7)**

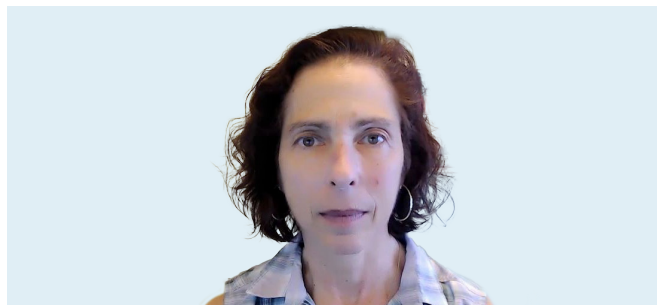
- When possible, schedule a pre-euthanasia appointment to talk about what is going to happen, answer questions and arrange logistics.
- Maintain a professional, caring veterinary team who are willing to accommodate owner/pet preferences

- Administer pre-euthanasia sedation to minimize chances their animal shows pain or distress before or during the procedure
- Allow the owner to remain with their pet for the entirety of the procedure
- Offer clients privacy before and after the death without feeling rushed
- Handle their pet's body respectfully

These are the things most important to pet owners before, during and after euthanasia. These factors, coupled with your medical knowledge and compassion, ensure the euthanasia experience is a positive one for all involved, thereby enhancing animal welfare and helping support the client-veterinarian relationship.

## About the Author

Lori Kogan, Ph.D. is a Professor of Clinical Sciences at Colorado State University. She is the Chair of the [Human-Animal Interaction section \[apa-hai.org\]](http://apa-hai.org) of the American Psychological Association and Editor-in-Chief of the [Human-Animal Interaction \[cabidigitallibrary.org\]](http://cabidigitallibrary.org) journal, an open-access, online publication published by [CABI \[cabi.org\]](http://cabi.org). She publishes and presented regularly on topics related to human-animal interactions in both psychology and veterinary medicine venues.



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