



Terminally ill pets get hospice care

By Marianne Thomas-Ogle -- The Birmingham N...

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Jim Elrod, left, a minister at Wiregrass Hospice in Birmingham, and veterinarian Linda Henckell, visit with Blue, a healthy cat at Henckell's Cat Haven Veterinary Clinic. (Hal Yeager / The Birmingham News)

Jim Elrod has worked for nearly 20 years as a hospice minister, helping terminally ill people find peace and comfort at the end of life.

So when the Vestavia Hills resident's cat, Roxie, became sick with no hope of recovery, he sought an alternative to treatment at a veterinary clinic before the inevitable act of euthanasia.

"Roxie had been in our house for 20 years and my wife and I believed staying in a clinic would bring about her death quicker than her disease would," Elrod said. "Our work with people who are ill and dying made us believe it was possible to do the same with our pet, to keep her comfortable and at home until her time had come."

Elrod set about researching pet hospice, but found while it is offered in other areas of the country, there are no pet hospice clinics in Alabama.

A friend recommended he talk to Dr. Linda Henckell, who owns Cat Haven Veterinary Clinic at 2100 8th Court South.

An Auburn graduate who specializes in the care of cats, Henckell has provided an informal hospice service for dogs and cats for several years.

"When I graduated from veterinary school, we didn't give a lot of medication to prevent pain," she said. "An important part of pet hospice is to recognize that animals feel pain and to work to give them the best quality of life as opposed to a lengthier life."

Henckell's service often consists of administering fluids to the animal to address kidney failure and to encourage eating. Depending on the case, she provides pain medications in different forms, along with fluids and supplements for the owner to give at home.

But Henckell is quick to acknowledge that euthanasia is a viable option for animals in terminal conditions.

"Sometimes you have no choice but to end their suffering," she said. "The word euthanasia means 'good death' and part of the veterinarian oath is to relieve animal suffering."

Kelley Dickey of Irondale sought Henckell's help when she discovered a growth in the mouth of her 8-year-old cat, Bowie.

A biopsy showed it to be an aggressive cancerous tumor that was spreading inward and outward, Dickey said.

The treatment -- surgery followed by chemotherapy and radiation -- had only a 5 percent chance of success.

"The cure was as bad as the cancer with no guarantee," Dickey said. "It was not an option to me because it would cause more harm and so much pain, Bowie would have no quality for the life he had left."

Over the next four months, Dickey cared for Bowie at home with periodic visits to Cat Haven and home visits by Henckell.

A pain medication patch used for human cancer patients was applied to his back and he was given fluids regularly.

"He ate some cat food and boiled chicken and remained very active for four months," Dickey said. "But when he didn't want to play, when he turned his head away when I came in the room, I knew that he was ready to go."

Dr. Jamie Bellah is the head of the Department of Clinical Sciences, Auburn University College of Veterinary Medicine. Besides the medical treatment of the family pet, Bellah said pet hospice is often a bonding between the veterinarian and the pet owner.

"It's important for a vet to help the family understand what to expect, what is realistic, when to call, when to bring the pet in," Bellah said. "The decision to end your pet's life humanely is never easy and we need to help the family to become ready and know when the decision is right."

Bellah said he can see that pet hospice service could become a regular part of clinics some day, especially in larger cities.

Elrod's hospice care of Roxie lasted four months.

"She remained active and functional the whole time until the day she died," Elrod said. "That day, we gave her medication and laid with and petted her on our bed. Thankfully she was purring until the moment she died."

Their experiences with pet hospice have brought Elrod and Henckell together in an effort to educate the community and promote the service in the Birmingham area.

Elrod was able to convince the organizers of the 2009 Southern Veterinary Conference, held last August at the Wynfrey Hotel in Hoover, to include its first workshop on pet hospice. Another will be part of the conference in 2010, he said.

"We're working on creating public awareness, visiting area veterinarians and distributing materials to encourage the use of pet hospice here," he said.

The goal is a pet hospice program that will become a regular part of Birmingham clinics. Eventually, they hope that ministers and counselors volunteer to assist with the pain humans feel at the loss of their animal friends.

"Like human hospice, pet hospice is important for both the patient and the family," Elrod said. "There is an element of peace for both the pet and the owner when you can manage their pain, give comfort at home and provide a good life right to the end."

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