

Quality of Life to the End of Life: WE OWE IT TO THEM!

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Quality of Life Scale, End-of-Life Care, Pawspice, Pet Hospice, Palliative Care, Terminal Disease, Gift of Euthanasia, Well Death

Introduction

Every day, pet lovers are requesting their veterinarians to provide palliative and pet hospice care. When families are caring for aging, ailing or terminally ill pets, especially pets with advanced or recurrent cancer, they want and need compassionate medical care from the local pet hospital. These end-of-life care services need to include more **quality of life (QoL)** assessment tools so that caretakers can confidently determine what their ailing pets need. The time is now for all veterinarians to embrace the concept of palliative care, pet hospice and/or Pawspice care. Pawspice starts around the time of diagnosis of a life-limiting disease. Pawspice focuses on relief of pain and symptoms while offering kinder more gentle standard care to deal with the disease. Pawspice transitions to hospice when the pet declines or when death is expected within weeks, days or hours.

How do we know when a chronic, morbid condition starts to ruin a pet's QoL? Most older pets have one or more morbid conditions such as



painful osteoarthritis, obesity or organ disease. When a life-limiting disease, or cancer and its related treatment, exert added burdens on a compromised pet, when or how do we determine if QoL is impacted or threatened? How can pet caregivers confidently determine what is satisfactory? Who is capable of monitoring that pet? How are they making their decisions? At what point should caregivers abandon further curative therapy? What obligation does the veterinary team (v-team) have to provide palliative care or to preserve their clients' hope for a beloved pet's well being? Veterinarians are frequently asked, "When is the right time to euthanize my beloved pet? How will I know?"

The "HHHHMM" Quality of Life Scale

To help caregivers assess a beloved pet's QoL, this author developed an easy to use QoL scale and scoring system. The QoL scale guides pet lovers to work with their v-teams to look at the necessary ingredients that make pet hospice a workable end of life program. Some of these items are very difficult to face especially when one is in denial. Pet owners must ask themselves if they are truly able to provide enough care to maintain their ailing pet properly. The "HHHHMM" QoL Scale acronym allows easy recall for pet caregivers. The five Hs and two Ms represent **Hurt, Hunger, Hydration, Hygiene, Happiness, Mobility and More good days than bad days** [pawspice.com].

Animals have basic needs and desires which should be recognized and respected by their caretakers. The Five Freedoms of animal welfare, developed in the United Kingdom are: **1. Freedom from Hunger and Thirst, 2. Freedom from Discomfort, 3. Freedom from Pain, Injury or Disease, 4. Freedom to Express Normal Behavior, 5. Freedom from Fear and Distress.** [fawc.org.uk/freedoms.htm] The Five Freedoms list was developed in the 1960's for farm animals. Several adaptations improved this list along the way and it is truly applicable for all pets. With good veterinary supervision, pet owners can maintain these basic desires with a satisfactory level of comfort and pain control for their pets during hospice care. When the score falls below what is felt to be acceptable, then there is no justification in continuing the hospice.

The HHHHHMM QoL Scale (Table 1, page 12) provides useful guidelines for caregivers to help sustain a positive and rewarding relationship that nurtures the human-animal bond at the end of life. This simple-to-use tool provides a framework to assess various aspects of home care and the well being of failing patients. The straightforward QoL Scale, with its objective scoring, automatically helps family members face reality without guilt feelings or confusion. It asks people to quantify their observations as they struggle through the difficult decision making process of whether to maintain their pet's end-of-life care or to elect the gift of euthanasia.

Pet owners can bring the HHHHHMM QoL Scale to their veterinarian's attention so they can

help to correct deficient criteria. If the veterinarian can help relieve pain and discomfort by at least 30-60%, the improvements can create a remarkable rejuvenation in the pet's well being. The v-team can teach pet owners to assess and control their pet's pain and provide good nutritional and hydration support. When discussing hygiene, the v-team can demonstrate wound care techniques and teach caregivers to prevent decubital ulcers by using egg crate mattresses, soft bedding and body rotation. The v-team might also have suggestions to prevent self soiling with strategic elevation, absorbent towels, diapers and so forth.

When family members are empowered to use the QoL Scale for assessment of the necessary criteria, they may realize that they need to ratchet up certain aspects of care to properly maintain their pet. A well-managed end-of-life care program allows more time for tender private moments and sweet conversation to be shared between family members and their dying pet.

More Good Days than Bad Days

If a terminal pet experiences more than 3-5 bad days in a row, QoL is too compromised to continue the hospice. This would also correlate with the QoL score dropping below 35. When a healthy, two-way interactive human-animal bond is no longer possible, it is time to let go. All family members who make the effort to work with the QoL scale will become self aware that the end is near. The final decision needs to be made if the pet suffers break through pain despite being on combination pain medications. The veterinary oath clearly binds the v-team to prevent suffering. It is important to have plan A,B,C regarding euthanasia and after life needs. It is best to be prepared. When a beloved pet no longer has quality of life, it is merciful to provide heavy sedation to relax the pet's anxiety. Some near-death pets may pass on peacefully. But the rigors of death may be harsh and unpredictable and too difficult to observe for most loving families. Most dying pets receive the kind gift of a bond-centered euthanasia. The gift of euthanasia can be pre-arranged to take place at home or at the local pet hospital. However, if the pet slips into crisis after hours or on a weekend, and the final call must be made for euthanasia, it can be provided at an emergency clinic.

Don't Let a Pet Suffer to Death

Due to cultural, religious or personal beliefs, a few pet owners and a small contingent of veterinarians and counselors prefer natural death over assisted death. When a client has this bias, it is difficult and disheartening for the v-team to justify caring for an emaciated, dehydrated, depressed, terminal patient that is being forced to endure further deterioration, pointless pain and suffering until liberated by death. When a veterinarian or pet hospice counselor has this bias, it affects how they think and how they influence the pet owner's decision making for their terminal pet when the bad days persist without any good days. The attending doctor or counselor may be sincerely attempting to respect the owner's wishes, while caring for the patient. Yet, they may be totally unaware of how they are manipulating their clients into withholding



Pawspice & “HHHHHMM” QoL Scale Synopsis

Dr. Alice Villalobos, a renowned veterinary oncologist, developed “Pawspice,” a conceptual quality of life program for pets that starts when a well or sick pet is diagnosed with a life-limiting condition or disease. Pawspice offers palliative care that transitions into hospice care for animals as they approach their final days and hours of life. Pawspice protocols should not be considered synonymous with hospice which implies “giving up.” Instead, Pawspice care involves kinder, gentler versions of standard care to avoid adverse events that may put the pet at risk or destroy quality of life.

Pawspice simultaneously and consistently focuses on pain and symptom management to enhance quality of life. This approach often results in longer survival times for geriatric and compromised companion animals over those pets that are treated with standard “can do” care. Dr. Villalobos also developed a scoring system to help family members and veterinary teams assess a pet’s life quality,

The HHHHHMM Quality of Life Scale.

The five H’s stand for:

Hurt, Hunger, Hydration, Hygiene and Happiness.

The two M’s stand for

Mobility and More good days than bad days.

The QoL scale also serves as a helpful decision making tool to assist the v-team and pet lovers as they struggle through the difficult and emotionally draining process of making the final call for the gift of euthanasia to provide a peaceful and painless passing for a beloved pet.

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the mercy of euthanasia for a dying pet if or when it is needed.

It is fortunate if a pet is able to die at home in a painless and peaceful state. This is ideal and acceptable. This is most predictable when using veterinary supervision that includes home euthanasia services. It is a sad fact that not all terminal animals are able to pass away peacefully and naturally at home. Some dying pets go into terrible respiratory distress and thrash about and become agonal before death. Witnessing this traumatic scenario is a horrible experience for loving family members who did not want their beloved pet to suffer this pointless indignity without having the option of euthanasia. Family members feel guilty and are haunted for years with these harsh memories. Therefore, it is important to instruct pet owners who prefer a natural death to have a backup plan in case their pet goes into a distressful crisis and needs professional help to change worlds. Caregivers should know where to go 24/7 for immediate assistance for the gift of euthanasia to avoid a beloved pet’s futile and unnecessary “suffering to death.”

Summary

The HHHHHMM QoL Scale provides useful guidelines for caregivers. It helps sustain a positive and rewarding relationship that humanely nurtures the human-animal bond at the end of life during palliative care, hospice or Pawspice. This simple-to-use tool recruits caregivers and their v-teams to evaluate and improve important criteria that will promote and maintain a good quality of life for the dependent pet. The QoL Scale helps family members face reality without confusion and quantify their observations as they struggle with the difficult decision of whether to maintain their pet’s end-of-life care or to elect the gift of euthanasia.

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Quality of Life Scale

(The HHHHMM Scale)

Pet caregivers can use this Quality of Life Scale to determine the success of Pawspice care.
Score patients using a scale of: 0 to 10 (10 being ideal).

Score	Criterion
0-10	HURT – Adequate pain control & breathing ability is of top concern and outweighs all others. Is the pet's pain well managed? Can the pet breathe properly? Is oxygen supplementation necessary?
0-10	HUNGER – Is the pet eating enough? Does hand feeding help? Does the pet need a feeding tube?
0-10	HYDRATION – Is the pet dehydrated? For patients not drinking enough, use subcutaneous fluids daily to supplement fluid intake.
0-10	HYGIENE – The pet should be brushed and cleaned, particularly after eliminations. Avoid pressure sores with soft bedding and keep all wounds clean.
0-10	HAPPINESS – Does the pet express joy and interest? Is the pet responsive to family, toys, etc.? Is the pet depressed, lonely, anxious, bored or afraid? Can the pet's bed be moved to be close to family activities?
0-10	MOBILITY – Can the pet get up without assistance? Does the pet need human or mechanical help (e.g., a cart)? Does the pet feel like going for a walk? Is the pet having seizures or stumbling? (Some caregivers feel euthanasia is preferable to amputation, but an animal with limited mobility yet still alert and responsive can have a good quality of life as long as caregivers are committed to helping the pet.)
0-10	MORE GOOD DAYS THAN BAD – When bad days outnumber good days, quality of life might be too compromised. When a healthy human-animal bond is no longer possible, the caregiver must be made aware that the end is near. The decision for euthanasia needs to be made if the pet is suffering. If death comes peacefully and painlessly, that is okay.
* TOTAL	*A total over 35 points represents acceptable life quality to continue with pet hospice (Pawspice).

Original concept, *Oncology Outlook*, by Dr. Alice Villalobos, *Quality of Life Scale Helps Make Final Call*, VPN, 09/2004; scale format created for author's book, *Canine and Feline Geriatric Oncology: Honoring the Human-Animal Bond*, Blackwell Publishing, 2007. Adapted for the International Veterinary Association of Pain Management, 2011 Hospice Guidelines. Reprinted for the Latham Newsletter with permission from Dr. Villalobos & Wiley-Blackwell.

