

# Killing Healthy Animals, an Ethical Dilemma?

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Many veterinarians have refused to euthanise (euthanatize) a companion animal when the reason for euthanasia is that the owner no longer needs or desires the animal's companionship. Most working animals, on the other hand, are killed when they can no longer work or when they are no longer profitable. On what should the decision to keep or kill the animal be based? Is it a matter of species, economics, or the type of service that the animal provides?

Rollin (2006) considers the answer to this question is not to be found in our social consensus ethic, which is essentially silent on any matter of right-to-life for other than humans. Thus, such decisions are left to a veterinarian's personal ethic, his or her own view of right and wrong, good and bad, justice and injustice, as these apply to animals. In the future, the veterinary profession may possibly collectively adopt some ethical principles regarding these matters as part of professional ethics, but, as yet, it has not done so, and in fact, veterinarians (as well as humane societies) are split evenly on convenience euthanasia of healthy companion animals. Neither species, use, nor economics provides morally relevant reasons for veterinarians who believe that their primary obligation is to the animal rather than the owner, and that part of their primary job is to save life. To go against one's own moral commitments on such an issue is to invite moral stress, arising out of discordance between what one believes one ought to do and what one actually does. Moral stress is highly erosive of physical and mental well-being, as well as job satisfaction. To such a veterinarian, only the amelioration of suffering provides a good reason for killing. Thus to such a practitioner, there is *never* a good reason for killing a healthy animal. Such a veterinarian should, therefore, work to find alternatives to killing, such as re-homing.

For veterinarians who do not, in their personal ethic, see animal life as morally requiring preservation, the issue is clear; animals may be killed at an owner's behest. The only issue for them is assuring that death is indeed painless. Rollin considers such veterinarians morally culpable, if they save the owner's money at the expense of animal suffering, as when for reasons of cost, infusion of disinfectant is used for killing horses.

Euthanasia is not, in law, an act of veterinary surgery, and may be carried out by anyone provided that it is carried out humanely (RCVS, 2008). No veterinary surgeon is obliged to kill a healthy animal unless required to do so under statutory powers as part of their conditions of employment. Veterinary surgeons do, however, have the privilege of being able to relieve an animal's suffering in this way in appropriate cases.

The RCVS states that it should be recognised that clients are capable of making informed and conscientious decisions concerning the future of their animals. Thus the client is an important contributor to the decision. To refuse an owner's request for euthanasia, therefore, may add to the owner's distress and could be deleterious to the welfare of the animal.

The RCVS states that where, in all conscience, a veterinary surgeon cannot accede to a client's request for euthanasia he or she should recognise the extreme sensitivity of the situation and make sympathetic efforts to direct the client to alternative sources of advice.

Rollin considers it is well within the role of the veterinarian as a healing professional to deploy one's Aesculapian authority (Aesculapius, Roman god of medicine; authority that our society dictates that we must give to doctors) to keep a healthy animal alive; medicine aims at restoring *or* maintaining healthy living. He believes being sensitive to the client's reasons and using one's Aesculapian authority to do so does not mean that one should abrogate serving the best interests of the animal. It simply means learning to communicate that requirement to a client in a way that helps ease the pain of thwarting their desires.

The use of the word euthanasia for the ending of the life of a healthy animal is questionable. The Oxford English Dictionary defines euthanasia as: "the painless killing of a patient suffering from an incurable disease or in an irreversible coma".

— ORIGIN from Greek *eu* 'well' + *thanatos* 'death'.

The Friends of Animals ActionLine (Winter 2002-03) states that *Euthanasia,* "properly used, refers to a death in one's best interest ... The routine killing of sentient individuals simply to deal with their large numbers would not constitute euthanasia even if there were a painless method of implementing it".

Animal Rights Malta states that since euthanasia applies to both humans and non-humans, one could easily know whether in the case of non-humans a killing is really euthanasia by considering whether we would call it euthanasia if the person being killed was human. The organization uses the following example:

"Let's say, a human is in severe incurable pain, and will die soon enough. Irrespective of whether one approves of euthanasia in the case of humans, or whether one disapproves, killing this person by the least painful method with his consent (or deciding whether it is in his/her best interests if the person is not in a position to make his will known) qualifies as euthanasia. The same obviously applies in the case where the dying victim is a non-human animal.

Now let's say that a human just happens to be homeless and poor, and that we have an acute problem of homelessness and poverty in our country. Does killing this human, who happens to be healthy despite his poverty and homelessness, qualify as euthanasia, provided that we kill him by the least painful method available? The answer is definitely and unequivocally a NO. The same applies in the case of homeless non-human animals, and it is only speciesism which sets different standards to similar situations. The killing of healthy non-human animals is murder, not euthanasia."

It seems that "euthanasia" is often the term used for the killing of a healthy animal, at least partly because people are uncomfortable with the term "killing".

Economic, emotional, and space limitations or changes in lifestyle may cause an owner to consider euthanasia for their pet. The AVMA (2008) states that sometimes it is possible to find another home for the pet and that option should be pursued prior to opting for euthanasia.

The AVMA says that euthanasia should be considered only when alternatives are not available. It is not opposed to the euthanasia of unwanted animals, when appropriate, by properly trained personnel, using acceptable humane methods.

Euthanasia might be necessary if a pet has become vicious, dangerous, or unmanageable. Some undesirable and abnormal behavior can be changed, so it is important that the owner discuss these situations with their veterinarian. Personally I support the euthanasia of animals which present an obvious danger to society.

An interesting side to the argument of whether a healthy animal should be euthanized is outlined below (comments of an internet forum member):

“Is it so wrong to put down a healthy happy animal? If someone could ensure that it would be painless and fairly instant, then why would it be cruel to put down a champion horse in the top of its game? In today's society, if someone went out and had 50 healthy, friendly and safe horses euthanized for no apparent reason, they would undoubtedly receive all kinds of hate mail and antagonism. But did they really do anything wrong?”

As humans we place so many of our own thoughts and emotions on to animals. Animal lovers are ready to save animals at any cost, but so long as it's not painful or cruel, does it really matter if a horse or other animal dies? Humans in general have such a fear of death, that we are ready to protect all living creatures from it. But animals have no fear of death. Yes, they have instincts that make them fear danger and things that could lead to their death, but they don't sit around wondering about an afterlife or what will happen to their souls.”

The American Humane Association states that every year, an estimated four to six million dogs and cats are euthanized in animal care and control facilities in the United States. “This problem is pervasive, and it remains a source of shame for our country.” The American Humane Association's *Getting to Zero*® Initiative is a national undertaking based on the profound belief that, within our lifetime, American society can reduce to zero the number of healthy or treatable dogs, cats and other companion animals that are euthanized in animal care and control facilities. This program will help identify, support and obtain funding for the replication of community-based interventions that have demonstrated success in reducing the euthanasia of healthy and treatable animals. These include adoption, foster care, spay/neuter, training, transfer and generally bringing community support where it is needed most.

Personally, I cannot envisage this figure reaching zero since there will always be irresponsible behaviour among humans which prevents this.

The approach to this ethical question that I foresee utilizing once I am licensed as a veterinarian will be to ensure I do not take up employment with a practice which obliges me under the employment contract to euthanise a healthy animal at the client's request. I cannot imagine that I would be comfortable morally with such actions and will require freedom to utilize other options for the future of the individual animal.

In addition to any traditional practice work, I foresee undertaking charity work overseas in less developed countries and I imagine this issue could definitely come to the fore under circumstances of poverty where the alternative options for animals may be much more

limited. I imagine that the pressures in such an environment would be different to those in the developed world and can foresee that I may have to be prepared to re-address this issue for the particular circumstances.

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