

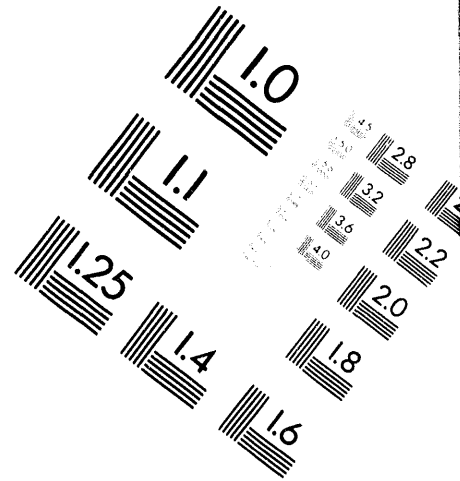
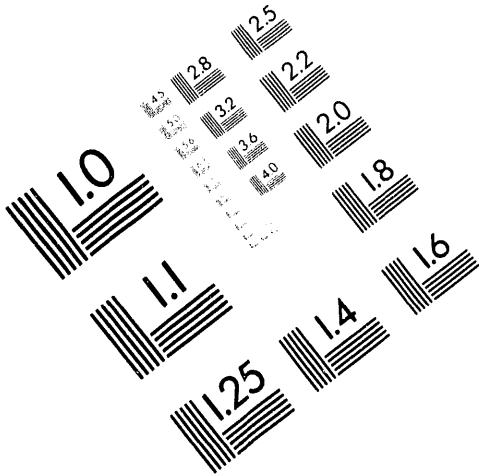


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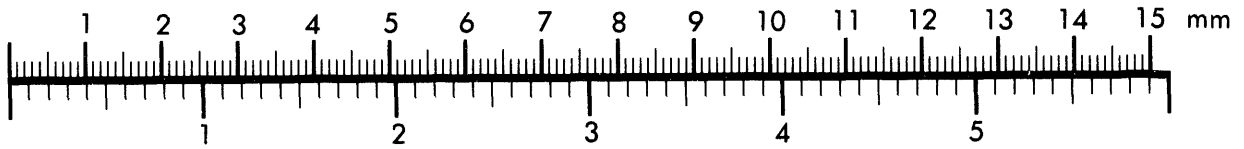
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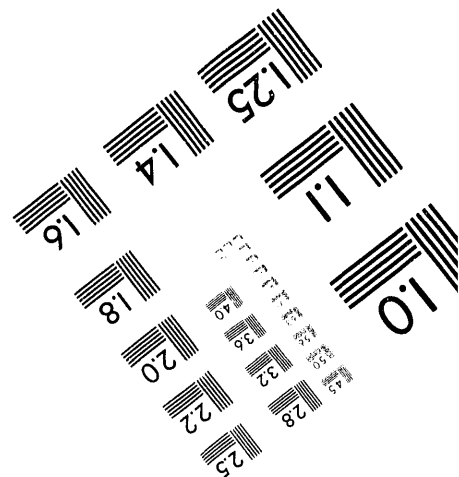
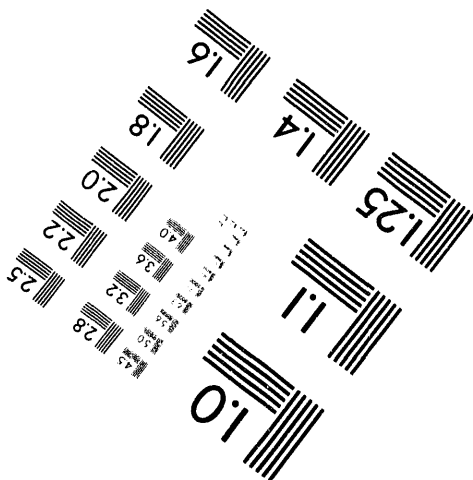
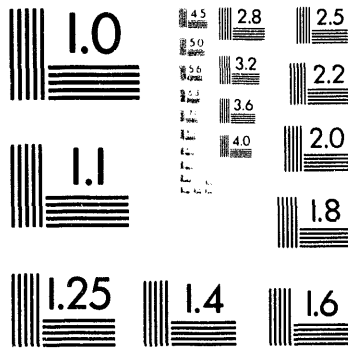
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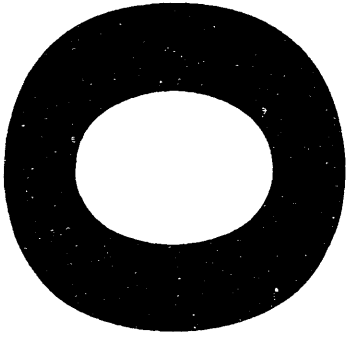
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THE SIGNIFICANT HUMAN-ANIMAL BOND:  
PETS WITH CANCER

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## THE SIGNIFICANT HUMAN-ANIMAL BOND: PETS WITH CANCER

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For some time, the emphasis of veterinary medicine has been on the science of medicine, with often little discussion of the art and ethics of the profession. Veterinarians have responsibilities to both the animal and its owner. In the past several years there has been an increased awareness and concern about human-animal bonds. As a result of this awareness, we have begun to appreciate the nature, strength, and significance of bonds that develop between humans and companion animals. For example, it is typical for a pet to be perceived as and treated as a member of the family. One reason companion animals have assumed greater significance is because the structure of the family has changed in the past 20 years. As a result of this perception and subsequent feelings and behavior, animals provide special and beneficial relationships for many years. It is partly because of this role of the pet in promoting human health and happiness that we as veterinarians have a tremendous obligation to assist both owner and animal. The mark of the good practitioner concerns not only the ability to diagnose and treat accurately, but also the ability to show understanding and compassionate judgement.

On the other side of these emotional attachments, we now know that a special companion animal with a serious illness that could prove to be terminal can produce feelings of impending loss that were previously thought to occur only when people die. As you will note in this document and throughout this course, grieving and mourning for a pet is difficult under any circumstance and can truly be an emotional ordeal for the pet owner without support and understanding from veterinarian, family, and friends.

Just as owning, caring for, and loving a pet shapes and modifies the life of an owner, a pet with cancer alters and reshapes an owner's sense of who he/she is and how he/she is to behave. The possible death of a pet is more than just the impending demise of "just a dog" or "just a cat"; it signals the end of one period of the human-animal relationship and the beginning of the process of bringing closure to a unique period in a person's life. The greater the pet's role and importance in a person's life, the more likely a diagnosis of cancer or impending death will affect him or her deeply. Pet owners often confide that the death of their pet hurt as much as the death of their mother, father, or grandparent.

Terminal illness and death in any form is a difficult social issue-one that is often avoided and ignored. For many veterinarians, an owner's reaction to a diagnosis of cancer or the death of a pet is seen as childish, stupid, even crazy. There is little acceptance of bereavement in this situation; few people consider it necessary or appropriate. Caring for a pet

and allowing the relationship, in life and death, to influence an owner need not be viewed as "good" or "bad"; rather, having companion animals adds a richness and depth to many human lives and is therefore appropriate for these people.

#### THE VETERINARIAN'S ROLE

Society has traditionally called on veterinarians for information and guidance in areas of sensitivity and ethical consequence. For the lay person, no area of veterinary expertise touches a nerve more sensitive than the relationship between humans and animals and the effects of a serious illness or the death of a beloved pet. Only recently, however, has the veterinary profession had to deal with a wave of interest in human-animal relationships.

While people have always developed special relationships with animals that share their environments, recent changes in family structure and mobility have heightened the chances and significance of such relationships. More than ever, people live alone or in small groups, often away from their places of birth, generally in cities or suburbs. In urban environments pets live close to people, providing them with companionship, protection, affection, social opportunities, and a chance for one creature to care for another.

As human-animal attachments develop and change, so do the demands on those who treat pets. Beyond competent medical care, what do clients ask of veterinarians? What services should the

health team provide? What is the role of the veterinarian in dealing with client grief? Some argue that veterinarians and their staffs have no responsibility for the emotional needs of pet owners. Clinicians may feel that the family should handle it's own sorrow. Others feel strongly that discussing painful situations encourages people to dwell in unhealthy behavior. Still others believe that, since they are not trained psychotherapists, it is better not to stir up strong emotions.

On the other hand, there have always been veterinarians who believe dealing with a client's reaction to the death of a pet is part of a professional's function. In general, these clinicians and their staffs have relied on innate skill to guide them through such situations. There has been little training available to help practitioners deal with grief despite growing interest in the field. With very little formal training to rely on, many practitioners have attempted to spare clients emotional pain by shielding them (as well as themselves) from emotionally painful experiences. This "protection strategy" might manifest itself in many ways including discouraging clients from seeking treatment for the pet with cancer. Veterinarians have an unrelenting obligation to ensure that the advice he or she gives on such life and death matters as cancer is scientifically acceptable. Clinicians who have wanted to support clients through the loss of an important family member have been on their own.

Pet loss counseling as it relates to the treatment of cancer in dogs and cats reflects a major shift in perspectives in

veterinary medicine. Owners of pets with cancer want desperately to know about potential cancer treatments. Most importantly, owners need to make their own decisions about whether to seek treatment. To a considerable extent it is often the nature of the owner, as much as it is the nature of the animal's condition, that determines the ultimate treatment to be followed.

### THE GRIEVING PROCESS

The loss or anticipatory loss of a loved one - human or pet - causes emotional pain and characteristic behavior that is called grief. For the veterinarian to assist a grieving pet owner, it is important that he or she understands the well-established stages of grief. These stages are denial, bargaining, anger, and grief itself. Grief is the true sadness that is part of the bereavement process. After denial has faded into acceptance, and anger subsides, the pet owner is left with true grief. Some clients progress through grief in the following order: 1) the initial awareness of loss phase; 2) the coping with loss phase; 3) the saying good-bye phase; 4) the painful awareness of loss phase; 5) the recovering from loss phase; and, 6) the personal growth through grief phase.

### ISSUES UNIQUE TO OWNERS OF PETS WITH CANCER



Treating a companion animal with cancer is most often a long-term process. With exception, cancer can be viewed as a chronic progressive disease that will likely result in owners and veterinarians having frequent contact with each other. The emotional ups and downs of living with and caring for a terminally ill animal can exhaust the coping skills of both veterinarian and pet owner. It is easy to understand how relationship boundaries can become blurred, and clients may ask for more emotional support than veterinarians are willing or able to provide. This can often be avoided by establishing limits, setting boundaries, and defining roles. Veterinarians can determine what they are and are not willing to provide clients in terms of emotional support. This will limit the development of "awkward" situations for both the caregiver and the client. These limits can be defined in the framework of three professional roles in which veterinarians can be educators, sources of support, or facilitators. This necessitates the development of a personal "comfort level" about grief and loss issues. Developing this comfort level requires a knowledge of the grieving process and what expressions of grief are normal and healthy. It also requires recognition that grief is not limited by age, sex, ethnic group or socioeconomic status.

The symbolic nature of the illness itself conjures up images, ideas, and feelings associated with the word "cancer." The choices owners make regarding treatment for their pets with cancer is often influenced by these previous experiences.

Confronting complex decisions related to their pet with cancer is initially overwhelming for most owners. These are viewed as life and death decisions and require the utmost in empathy and patience from the veterinarian. In making decisions on each patient we must carefully balance the advantages of treatment versus the risks inherent in such treatment before making recommendations to the owner. Some clinicians like to apply identical methods of treatment to all patients with a given diagnosis. This ignores the individuality of the patient and its owner. Care must be taken to remove as many time pressures as possible so that clients can decide upon a course of action as soon as possible.

Death is only one of the many losses that pet owners experience when a companion animal is dying of cancer. Diagnostic and therapeutic procedures can alter physical appearance, function, and behavior in many ways. All of these changes ultimately result in the loss of the unique relationship between pet and owner. This loss triggers "anticipatory grief", in which the owner is grieving both the loss of the relationship as it once was and the pet's impending death. Veterinarians need to be aware of this phenomenon.

While there have been great advances in veterinary knowledge and skills in the past three decades, there has not been a parallel increase of knowledge or understanding related to attendant human needs. All veterinarians must pay more attention to the complex and incompletely understood human-animal

relationship. This is an important challenge for the profession that must be recognized and addressed.

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