

# Veterinary Euthanasia

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## Introduction

The College's *Professional Practice Standard: Veterinary Euthanasia* establishes fundamental expectations for a veterinarian performing euthanasia. The decision to euthanize an animal can be emotional and difficult. It can also raise complex issues for a veterinarian when deciding whether to recommend or perform euthanasia. Using a question-and-answer format, this document offers guidance on how to meet the expectations outlined in the Standard.



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## Frequently Asked Questions about Veterinary Euthanasia

### 1. Who can provide consent for euthanasia?

Unless otherwise permitted by legislation, a veterinarian may only perform euthanasia within the confines of a veterinarian-client-patient relationship (“VCPR”).

A veterinarian should take reasonable measures to ensure, where possible, that the owner of the animal or their designated authorized representative consents to euthanasia.

**Example:** Mary’s daughter Elizabeth has been bringing in Mary’s cat to Dr. Singh’s clinic for many years. Mary has designated Elizabeth as an authorized representative and has indicated that Elizabeth has the authority to make all care decisions on her behalf. This information is clearly outlined in the medical record. Elizabeth has brought in Mary’s cat for an appointment. During examination, Dr. Singh discovers that Mary’s cat has developed symptoms that are resulting in undue pain and suffering. Given this, Dr. Singh believes that euthanasia is the most humane course of action. Dr. Singh discusses this diagnosis with Elizabeth and explains her options. After this discussion, Elizabeth consents to Dr. Singh performing euthanasia.

### 2. A critically injured animal has been presented for treatment to a veterinarian. The owner of the animal is unknown or cannot be found promptly. What options does a veterinarian have to alleviate the animal’s suffering?

Section 61 of the Provincial Animal Welfare Services Act outlines the circumstances in which a veterinarian may euthanize an animal without owner consent. This exemption applies to all types of animals, regardless of ownership or oversight. The sections states that a veterinarian may euthanize an animal without consent when:

- (a) the animal is suffering;
- (b) the animal’s owner or custodian cannot be found promptly, or the veterinarian reasonably believes that the animal does not have an owner or custodian or has been abandoned; and
- (c) in the veterinarian’s opinion, euthanization is the most humane course of action<sup>1</sup>.

**Example One:** Dr. Abara owns a small veterinary clinic in rural Ontario. One afternoon, an individual

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<sup>1</sup> **Most humane courses of action (Taken from the *Provincial Animal Welfare Services Act*)**

(3) For the purposes of this Act, euthanasia is the most humane course of action for an animal if,

(a) immediate veterinary treatment cannot prolong the animal’s life; or  
(b) prolonging the animal’s life would result in undue suffering for the animal.



brings in a dog that has been hit by a car. The individual is not the owner or authorized representative of the dog. Dr. Abara completes an examination of the animal and determines that it is critically injured and suffering. The dog is not wearing a collar and does not have a microchip. A quick call to the local animal control authority confirms that no individual has presented themselves seeking the dog. Given the level of the dog's injuries and the small likelihood of locating an owner or custodian in a timely manner, Dr. Abara makes the decision to euthanize the dog as it is the most humane course of action.

**Example Two:** Dr. Nowak owns a large animal mobile in northern Ontario. One morning, Dr. Nowak is called out to a county road where a deer has been hit by a truck. Upon examination of the animal, Dr. Nowak determines that it is critically injured and suffering. Dr. Nowak is aware that wildlife populations do not have a specific owner or authorized representative. Given the level of the deer's injuries, Dr. Nowak believes that euthanasia is the most humane course of action and makes the decision to euthanize the deer.

### **3. Does a veterinarian have to euthanize an animal when requested by a client?**

A veterinarian retains the right to refuse to provide any veterinary service that they believe is not in the best interest of the animal or that they cannot properly perform. In these cases, a veterinarian may need to offer alternative treatments or recommend that the client seek another veterinarian.

As in any other case, a veterinarian is expected to maintain medical records of any discussions held with a client and the reasoning behind any decision made.

### **4. What should a veterinarian do when a client refuses to consent to euthanasia for an animal that is unduly suffering?**

Should a veterinarian be presented with a situation in which a client refuses to provide consent to euthanasia for an animal that is unduly suffering to the point that the veterinarian believes that the animal is subject to abuse, undue physical or psychological hardship, privation or neglect, that veterinarian has a legal obligation under the *Provincial Animal Welfare Services Act* to report the case to a provincial animal welfare inspector. Clients who are refusing to consent to euthanasia should be made aware of this legal obligation, and the veterinarian should strive to be clear and forthcoming.

### **5. Does a veterinarian still have to report suspected abuse after an animal has been euthanized?**

A veterinarian's duty to report under the *Provincial Animal Welfare Services Act* does not conclude

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upon an animal's death. Should a veterinarian be presented with an animal that they believe was subject to abuse, undue physical or psychological hardship, privation, or neglect, that veterinarian has a legal obligation to report the case to a provincial animal welfare inspector even if the animal has already been euthanized.

### **6. What steps should a veterinarian take when a new/potential client requests an appointment to euthanize an animal?**

When a new and/or potential client contacts a veterinarian/veterinary facility requesting euthanasia for their animal, the veterinarian/veterinary clinic may proceed with booking the appointment. As with all new clients, the veterinarian is obligated to establish a VCPR prior to providing veterinary services.

**Example:** The receptionist at Dr. Frederick's veterinary clinic receives a phone call from an individual, that is not an existing client, requesting an appointment to euthanize their animal. The receptionist explains to the individual that there is an appointment available the next day in which they could meet with Dr. Frederick and discuss the formation of a VCPR. The receptionist further explains that a decision on what veterinary services may be provided is part of a discussion that will be held with the veterinarian. The individual agrees to come in the next day to discuss their animal with Dr. Frederick.

### **7. Does a veterinarian have to conduct a complete physical examination before euthanizing an animal?**

A veterinarian is expected to use professional judgement based on the specific circumstances to determine what assessment of the animal is needed to reach at least a general or preliminary diagnosis and determine whether euthanasia is a recommended course of action. This assessment may include, for example, discussion with the client, physical examination or premise visit, and/or diagnostic testing.

## **Frequently Asked Questions about Delegation and Veterinary Euthanasia**

### **8. Can a veterinarian delegate obtainment of client consent for euthanasia to an auxiliary?**

Given its highly sensitive nature, it is best practice that the informed client consent conversation related to euthanasia occur between a veterinarian and their client. Auxiliaries may aid in this discussion (e.g. aiding the client in completing paperwork), but this assistance should occur after the

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informed consent conversation between the veterinarian and the client has occurred.

### **9. Can a veterinarian delegate the performance of euthanasia to an auxiliary?**

A veterinarian is permitted to delegate the performance of euthanasia to an auxiliary. A veterinarian is expected to use their professional judgement to determine when it is appropriate to delegate this task.

A veterinarian should consider several factors before determining whether it is appropriate to delegate the performance of euthanasia to an auxiliary. These include, but are not limited to, the training, skills, and knowledge of the auxiliary, the level of risk of harm to the animal if euthanasia is performed by the auxiliary, and the ability for the auxiliary to properly identify and react to any adverse effects that may occur. A veterinarian should not delegate euthanasia unless they are confident that the auxiliary is able to be as safe and effective as the veterinarian in the same circumstances.

Clients must be informed when an auxiliary will be providing any aspect of animal care.

### **10. Under what levels of supervision can a veterinarian delegate the performance of euthanasia?**

A veterinarian is permitted to use their professional judgement to determine the level of supervision required (immediate, direct, or indirect). The College acknowledges that currently most delegation of euthanasia occurs under immediate or direct supervision. However, while uncommon, the College recognizes that there may be specific circumstances where it is in the animal's best interest for a veterinarian to delegate euthanasia to an auxiliary under indirect supervision.

**Example One:** Dr. Gregory operates a mixed animal veterinary practice as a sole practitioner. While Dr. Gregory is out on farm calls, an existing client brings their dog into the hospital for euthanasia. The dog has been receiving palliative care by Dr. Gregory over the past month and there have been recent discussions about the dog's declining health and the need for euthanasia. Joan, a registered veterinary technician who works for Dr. Gregory, triages the dog and notes that it is showing signs of pain and suffering. Joan calls Dr. Gregory and discusses the dog's condition. Based on the information provided by Joan, Dr. Gregory determines that the animal is unduly suffering. Dr. Gregory is concerned that they will not be able to return to the clinic in time to alleviate the dog's suffering before it passes. Dr. Gregory speaks to the client over the phone and explains their diagnosis and concerns. Dr. Gregory obtains informed client consent to proceed with Joan performing the euthanasia under delegation and indirect supervision.

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**Example Two:** Dr. Abadi operates a large animal veterinary clinic that covers a large area of Northern Ontario. Dr. Abadi attends at a dairy farm to establish a VCPR and assess the animal(s) or group of animals. While attending the farm, Dr. Abadi notices that one of the cows is showing signs of injury. Dr. Abadi examines the animal and provides on-farm treatment.

A few days later, Michael, a registered veterinary technician who works for Dr. Abadi, attends on the farm with one of the clinic's associated mobiles to assist with disbudding some calves. While at the farm, Michael notices that the same cow that Dr. Abadi treated a few days earlier has taken a significant turn for the worse. Michael assesses the cow and note that she is showing signs of pain and suffering. Michael calls Dr. Abadi and discusses the cow's condition. Based on the information provided by Michael, Dr. Abadi determines that the animal is unduly suffering. Dr. Abadi is currently several hours away and is unable to attend at the farm. Dr. Abadi speaks to the client over the phone and explains their diagnosis and concerns. Dr. Abadi obtains informed client consent to proceed with Michael performing the euthanasia under delegation and indirect supervision.

## **11. Can a veterinarian confirm an animal's death through an auxiliary using indirect supervision?**

A veterinarian is permitted to confirm an animal's death based on information provided by an auxiliary through indirect supervision.

## **Legislative Authority**

R.R.O. 1990, Reg. 1093: General, s. 1, 17(1) 21, 17(1) 22, 17(1) 22.1, 18, 19, 27, 28, 33(2)(f)  
(Veterinarians Act)

Animals for Research Act, R.S.O. 1990, c. A.22

R.R.O. 1990, Reg. 557, Communicable Diseases - General s. 2 (Health Protection and Promotion Act)

O. Reg. 106/09: Disposal of Dead Farm Animals (Nutrient Management Act)

O. Reg. 105/09: Disposal of Deadstock (Food Safety and Quality Act)

Environmental Protection Act, R.S.O. 1990, c. E.19 and regulations

Provincial Animal Welfare Services Act, 2019, S.O. 2019 c. 13

Livestock Community Sales Act, R.S.O. 1990, c. L.22

O. Reg. 31/05: Meat, 2001, S.O. 2001, c. 20, s. 84.1 (Food Safety and Quality Act)

Minimum Standards for Veterinary Facilities, Titles 6 and 12, clause 13.4

Health of Animals Act (S.C. 1990, c. 21)

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## Resources

The following can be found at the College's website at [cvo.org](http://cvo.org):

1. *Professional Practice Standard: Veterinary Euthanasia*
2. *Professional Practice Standard: Establishing, Maintaining and Discontinuing a Veterinarian-Client-Patient Relationship (VCPR)*
3. *Guide to the Professional Practice Standard: Establishing, Maintaining and Discontinuing a Veterinarian-Client-Patient Relationship (VCPR)*
4. *Professional Practice Standard: Informed Client Consent*
5. *Guide to the Professional Practice Standard: Informed Client Consent*
6. *Professional Practice Standard: Medical Records*
7. *Guide to the Professional Practice Standard: Medical Records*
8. *Professional Practice Standard: Prescribing a Drug*
9. *Guide to the Professional Practice Standard: Prescribing a Drug*
10. *Professional Practice Standard: Dispensing a Drug*
11. *Guide to the Professional Practice Standard: Dispensing a Drug*
12. *Professional Practice Standard: Extra-Label Drug Use*
13. *Guide to the Professional Practice Standard: Extra-Label Drug Use*
14. *Professional Practice Standard: Use of Compounded Drugs in Veterinary Practice*
15. *Guide to the Professional Practice Standard: Use of Compounded Drugs in Veterinary Practice*
16. *Professional Practice Standard: Management and Disposal of Controlled Drugs*
17. *Guide to the Professional Practice Standard: Management and Disposal of Controlled Drugs*
18. *Professional Practice Standard: Delegation*
19. *Professional Practice Standard: Humane Animal Handling and Restraint*
20. *Position Statement: Reporting Animal Abuse or Neglect*
21. *Legislative Overview: Rabies*
22. *Legislative Overview: Mandatory Reporting*

College publications contain practice parameters and standards which should be considered by all Ontario veterinarians in the care of their patients and in the practice of the profession. College publications are developed in consultation with the profession and describe current professional expectations. It is important to note that these College publications may be used by the College or other bodies in determining whether appropriate standards of practice and professional responsibilities have been maintained. The College encourages you to refer to the website ([www.cvo.org](http://www.cvo.org)) to ensure you are referring to the most recent version of any document.