College of Veterinarians of British Columbia

Case Study: Neglected Necropsy

Published January 2018 *By Dr. Cathy Wilkie, Investigation Committee*

The Investigation Committee (IC) had a recent run of cases revolving around unexpected deaths, usually (but not always) associated with an anesthetic or sedation event. None of the clients in these cases had been offered the option of a necropsy.

There are many reasons not to offer a necropsy in a case where the cause of death (COD) is unknown. You may feel that the client would react badly to the suggestion. You may think that they've been through enough with the pet's death, never mind "cutting him open" after death. Maybe the last ten clients to whom you offered the option turned you down for various reasons. Or you may think that the necropsy will find something that you did wrong and open you up to liability.

I would encourage you to look at this option in another way. The death of a patient is a huge medical event. It is no different that if a patient is presented (alive) with a serious illness. You need to recommend appropriate diagnostic tests to pinpoint the cause of the problem. In this case, necropsy is the diagnostic test of choice. Failure to offer an obvious diagnostic test could come back to haunt you if it is decided that this omission might be neglect of your duty to the patient and client.

Five good reasons for doing necropsies:

1. **Professional conduct and protection of future patients**. If we can learn from a case and subsequently prevent another death, we certainly should be doing so. As medical professionals, we should have an intense interest in finding out why a patient died unexpectedly. A necropsy may or may not tell us the exact reason for the patient's death, but for the sake of the next patient you should strongly recommend a necropsy when you do not know the COD.

   A patient death needs to be treated with utmost gravity and seriousness. How can you say that the event will never be repeated if you don't find out what caused it? How can you assure your staff that this wasn't their fault, or a problem with your protocols? How can you say to any of your clients that you take every precaution to keep their pets safe during anesthesia (or at any other time) when you don't make an effort to find out why a patient died?

2. **Owner peace of mind**. If it is found that you made an error, don't assume that the client will automatically make a complaint or sue you. In the experience of Investigation

Committee members, owners are much more likely to complain if they don't know the reason for their pet's death. They will often assume malpractice, incompetence, or even abuse. Clients are less likely to assume this if you are appropriately sympathetic and sincerely offer to find out what happened.

3. **Decreasing owner misperception about anesthetic dangers**. Without answers, owners tend to generalize that "my dog died under anesthesia, so anesthesia is usually unsafe and always very scary". If we are able to show that the young cat had severe occult hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, the owner can understand this was the reason the cat died and that it's not just "one of those things" or “an allergy to anesthetic”. A patient's death should never be written off to "sometimes animals die". This cavalier attitude gives our clients the perception that we don't have control over the medical aspects of our cases and can also make us look rather heartless.

4. **Honest communication**. If the pet died because of something that you did or failed to do, knowing this affords you the opportunity to ensure that it doesn't happen again. You can communicate this and the changes you have instituted to the client. In many cases, all the client really wants to know is what happened and that no other pet will die for the same reason, if that's at all possible.

5. **If you did make a mistake it is not necessarily the end of the world from a complaints point of view**. The CVBC is not interested in hanging you out to dry for isolated errors. The role of the College is to protect the public. If a veterinarian makes a mistake, finds out exactly what the mistake was, and corrects it so that it doesn't happen again, that might be all that is needed to satisfy a complaint. In other words, don’t let the fear that you made a mistake prevent you from doing the right thing and encouraging the owner to allow a necropsy.

Other Necropsy Tips

- First and foremost, do not immediately freeze the body when a patient's death is even remotely unexpected or you get “that vibe” from the owner. Refrigerate the body and hold it for at least 24 hours, even if the owner initially declines a necropsy. This allows the owner to process grief. They may change their minds, and refrigeration allows you to have a necropsy done with as little freezing artifact as possible. (Of course, if you are looking at a 50 kg dog and a regular refrigerator, this may not be possible. Another option is to leave the pet at room temperature until the next day. Autolysis may be easier to interpret in the necropsy procedure than freezing artifact.)

- Who should do the necropsy? A necropsy at a local clinical pathology lab will provide you with a very experienced and unbiased opinion as to what happened to the animal. The second-best option is to ask another veterinarian to do the necropsy and get histology samples for you. Make sure that you obtain the owner’s permission. It's best if this other veterinarian is not a colleague in the same clinic or a close friend, in order to avoid client apprehension of bias. Choose someone whose medical knowledge you trust or who has a

good reputation. Call them to see whether they will do this for you. If a colleague asked you to help them out in this way, would you refuse?

- Arrange for transportation of the pet yourself; don't make the owners take their pet's body somewhere, unless they really want to. Ask the owner about their aftercare preferences and make sure that you can satisfy this. Reassure them that the body will be treated with dignity and respect at all times.

- One issue that comes up with some regularity is, "Who pays for the necropsy?" This is a business decision. If the owner wants a necropsy and can afford to pay for it, then that's one way to go. If the owner cannot afford one, it might be a wise business decision for the clinic to pay for the necropsy.

Bottom Line

Always offer. Always document and try to have the owners physically sign off if they decline your recommendation.