A Pet. Fellow or Unnecessary Obligations. The Point of View of Experienced Palliative Care Professionals

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Background:

Current data suggest that pets play a large part in the lives of people receiving palliative care. However, all of the previous studies have been carried out based on an observation of a small number of patients (max 20).

The knowledge about the role of pets living with a patient at his/her life's end, is important for hospice personnel. Persons with lower experience are especially prone to make mistakes by insisting on elimination of pets from patient's vicinity.

Aims:

Critical assessment of the presence of pets, in the direct vicinity of a patient, in the opinion of experienced physicians and nurses of the hospice staff.

Attempt to form universal recommendations for students and young professionals who begin their work with people receiving palliative care.

Method:

Interview based on open questions, relating to personal experience with animals accompanying patients in their last weeks of life.

The questions addressed the problems of animal care, possibility of zoonoses occurrence and the attitude of the patients towards their own pets (rejection, seeking, company)

The interviewed group was composed of physicians and nurses who work in hospice. The selected persons had at least 15 years of professional experience. The survey also included a question about a personal attitude towards pets and about experience of having a domesticated animal.

Results:

The authors acquired opinions of 40 experienced employees of working in hospices. The vast majority of interviewed persons did not declare that the presence of an animal was a burden for any patient and did not suggest addressing this topic directly.

Zoonoses, in the opinion of hospice physicians, did not pose a threat for patients. However, there were singular cases, where pets were removed from patient rooms (e.g. a case of parrots).

Conclusions:

A common conclusion based on all of the acquired information is confirming a significant role of pets in maintaining mental balance of patients. The decision about removing an animal should be left to the closest relatives and the issue, in the opinion of palliative professionals, should not be addressed directly. There is also no risk of contracting zoonose, even from animals independently leaving the hospice.