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New Professional Society Dedicated to Veterinary Hospice and Palliative Care

A [research study](#) conducted by Michigan State's College of Social Science interviewed veterinarians who left the profession and found that one-third of the veterinarians surveyed cited "compassion fatigue" as their reason for walking away, which largely relates to having to deal with dying patients and bereaved clients. Dr. Page Yaxley and Dr. Katherine Goldberg saw this burn-out as a growing need for training and research into end-of-life care.

"We can gain the ability to have strength in these situations and be proud of what we do, but it requires preparation and training," Dr. Yaxley said.

Last month, Dr. Yaxley and Dr. Goldberg founded the Veterinary Society for Hospice and Palliative Care (VSHPC), an organization that aims to advance veterinary hospice and palliative care and develop the focus into a distinct specialty.

Dr. Yaxley, DVM, DACVECC, went through a residency in Emergency and Critical Care at Michigan State and, during that residency, experienced the benefits of human hospice care.

"During my time as a resident I lost my mom, and going through hospice with her made me realize the comfort of hospice and palliative care to both the patient and the family," Dr. Yaxley said.

In 2011, following the completion of her residency, Dr. Yaxley pitched the idea of establishing a hospice at Michigan State, and in November of the same year opened the doors to Michigan State's Veterinary hospice. Dr. Yaxley had four goals for that program, which inform the VSHPC's objectives: to provide in-home hospice services to patients and pet owners, to provide ongoing education about end-of-life care



Dr. Goldberg(left) and Dr. Yaxley(right)

to students and the public, provide community outreach and to develop a database of end-of-life care research.

"Being a hospice care provider, I wanted to find ways to improve my own medical knowledge and be progressive," Dr. Yaxley said.

Dr. Yaxley met Dr. Katherine Goldberg, DVM, at a hospice conference in 2012 and realized that they shared a vision for advancing veterinary hospice and palliative care.

"When we met it was very clear that our goals were aligned," Dr. Goldberg said. "We both felt like developing core curricula in veterinary schools was the best way to move the discipline forward."

Dr. Goldberg graduated from Cornell in 2004, on track to become a specialist in emergency and critical care. She said that while she enjoyed the high-adrenaline emergency work, the cases she was presented with confronted her with a number of ethical questions surrounding how dying animals are cared for.

“It occurred to me that no one in my professional world was having these ethical conversations, and that became my focus,” Dr. Goldberg said.

In 2010, Dr. Goldberg started Whole Animal Veterinary Geriatrics and Veterinary Hospice services.

With the VSHPC, Dr. Yaxley and Dr. Goldberg hope to take the goals Dr. Yaxley laid out for the hospice program at Michigan State, and execute them on a larger scale. The organization’s long-term goal will be to establish veterinary hospice and palliative care as an established specialty. In the meantime, the society will focus on developing continuing education and establishing a network of end-of-life care providers to exchange experiences and enhance research into the field.

“We both acknowledge that a multidisciplinary, team approach is necessary for this kind of care, similar to human hospice care,” Dr. Goldberg said.

Currently, continuing education relating to veterinary hospice and palliative care is sparse, and the VSHPC plans to address that lack.

“There are very few ways for people to get continuing education about veterinary hospice, except through a few very narrow channels,” Dr. Yaxley said. “When I lecture about this I often bring up the fact that if you were in human medicine it would be mandatory that you serve a rotation in end-of-life care. I want to place a similar emphasis on end-of-life care in veterinary medicine.”

The VSHPC stresses that debate over mode of dying should not be the primary focus of hospice and palliative care providers. Traditionally, veterinarians have expected companion animals to die in a clinical setting, generally through euthanasia. Dr. Yaxley and Dr. Goldberg support euthanasia. However, they understand that there is a diversity of beliefs surrounding this issue, and feel that pet owners deserve skilled support no matter what path they choose.

“A good death is what the family decides it is, which is not always euthanasia,” Dr. Goldberg said. “I think we need to be prepared for that and make sure people feel supported with whatever they choose. If it’s euthanasia we owe it to people to do it well.”

Dr. Goldberg noted that though euthanasia is one of the most common procedures veterinarians perform many of them are still

uncomfortable with the procedure. This points to a lack of training in end of life care, and many veterinary schools offer less than one hour of end of life training in four years. This problem is even more apparent when veterinarians are confronted with clients who want to consider alternative modes of dying.

“One thing I deal with is clients who object to euthanasia, which a lot of veterinarians don’t consider,” Dr. Goldberg said. “Our job is not to bring people to what we think is right, it’s to support their decision in a humane way.”

The VSHPC envisions hospice and palliative care education as focused medical training, with a different perspective. Veterinarians trying to comfort a dying animal need to attend to an animal’s quality of life on a day-to-day basis and do not need to worry about the long-term side effects of their treatment.

“In human hospice, doctors will often prescribe anti-anxiety medications to deal with terminal restlessness. Veterinarians face terminal restlessness, but we don’t know what to use to treat it yet,” Dr. Yaxley said. “That’s one of the areas we really need more research in.”

In recent years, veterinary hospice and palliative care has emerged as more of a concern among both veterinarians and pet owners. One reason is the extended lifespan of companion animals, which is presenting veterinarians with infirmities that they are not accustomed to treating. Dr. Yaxley said that another reason hospice and palliative care is becoming more of a focus is that veterinary medicine has improved its capacity to diagnose terminal illnesses, which means that veterinarians will be diagnosing terminal illnesses earlier and more often, requiring them to extend the length of care and expand its availability.

“One of the main differences between human and animal hospice care is the length of time. In human hospices you’re talking about months to years of care and a lot of the time with veterinary medicine you’re talking about days to months,” Dr. Yaxley said. “Part of the reason for that is human medicine’s ability to diagnose terminal illnesses is profound and veterinary medicine is just catching up.”

The VSHPC plans to have more information about its immediate plans on its [website](#) by spring of 2014. However, veterinarians interested in getting involved with the organization are encouraged to contact either [Dr. Yaxley](#) or [Dr. Goldberg](#).