



Notes from the Consultant's Corner

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Give the Heart the Memo

Okay, I've got a tough one for you today. I'm just coming back from the Western Veterinary Conference (I'm actually sitting on the airplane) and I've been thinking about one of the presentations I gave yesterday. The session was entitled, "When You Grieve For Patients." Going into it, I assumed that most of the participants would want help with their grief over special patients who have died. Much to my surprise... it was not grief that they wanted to talk about; it was guilt (guilt about not diagnosing an illness sooner, about letting a patient down, about leaving a patient alone, about putting a patient through too much, and a whole lot more). I've realized (just yesterday) that this is a huge issue for many of you and that you are holding on to a lot of emotional pain. It was startling to hear the intensity of the guilt and I can only imagine the burdens some of you are carrying around.

I've known for a long time now that the expectations you place upon yourselves are too high. However, I don't think that I ever fully appreciated just how much these expectations set you up to feel guilty no matter what happens. It got me thinking about a few pivotal questions: 1) how do you make peace with your limits as a healer? 2) how do you make peace with your limits as a human being?; and the biggest one of all... how do you make peace with death? In pondering these questions, one very simple, yet critical, thought occurred to me. Veterinarians are never really allowed to accept death. After all as doctors, you are indoctrinated to fight disease and keep death at bay for as long a possible. Death becomes your unspoken enemy- the outcome that must be avoided at all costs. The trouble is that death will *always* be the eventual outcome. You can provide the best medical care possible for your patients but death will always occur at some point. In essence, you're taught to fight a battle that you will ultimately never win.

Now I know that many of you in the veterinary profession believe as I do that death is a natural, normal process and that euthanasia is often the kindest, most loving thing you can do for your patients. However, I'm starting to wonder if you really understand this in your heart.

You spend your entire professional lives fighting disease, enhancing quality of life for your patients, and keeping death at arm's length.

Yet, in the end, you still have to endure the ultimate set-up. When death comes...guilt comes.

Certainly, you know in your head that you have limits as a human being. You realize that death comes to all living things and you accept this as a fact. Unfortunately, someone forgot to tell your heart and it never received the memo. Maybe guilt arises from the heart refusing to accept what the head already knows: death is part of the natural order and cannot be circumvented. Your heart (the part that makes you such a good veterinarian) refuses to accept this. You are caught in a no-win scenario...when your patient's die (as they always will) you feel guilty no matter what.

Wow. What a terrible and profound trap. How can you do your job and keep yourself from falling into this minefield? How do you let your heart in on the big secret? I wish that I had the perfect answer or panacea for you. What a relief this would be for anyone who is feeling guilty. I'm not sure that anyone can ever come up with a brilliant or incisive suggestion for that. Getting the head and the heart to see things in the same way is very difficult indeed.

I'm wondering if part of it might be always reminding yourself that death *will* come eventually and that you can never predict the randomness of it. When death comes- despite your very best efforts- there needs to be a way to let your heart off the hook, thus sparing yourself this terrible guilt. Tall order? You betcha and I wish that I had the perfect answer. For now, maybe each of you needs to have a good, long conversation with your heart and make sure to give it the memo.



(photo from Dreamstime.com)