

Guidelines for supporting staff involved with animal euthanasia

People who kill animals, albeit humanely, as part of their job are at risk of experiencing euthanasia related stress that is not typical of other workplaces (Rohlf and Bennett 2005). They have reported experiencing feelings of guilt, unresolved grief, depression, substance abuse and physical ailments such as high blood pressure amongst a wide range of negative responses to euthanasia (Reeve et al 2005, Reilly 1993). Also, they sometimes feel stigmatised and unappreciated for the work that they do which is unpleasant (Stafford et al 2001; Baran et al 2009, Sanders 2010). Employee turnover rates are correlated to euthanasia rates in animal shelters (Rogelberg et al 2007), and with veterinary technicians (Rodeghier 2006).

These work impacts on staff are such that the work must be regarded as a significant hazard in terms of the Health and Safety in Employment Act.

Given the above, this guideline contains recommendations on the good practice for proactive support of staff involved with animal euthanasia. Massey University seeks to be a good employer, and act proactively in managing the hazard, with sensitivity, and in consultation with staff, in devising means to mitigate the identified negative impacts of animal euthanasia on affected staff.

As the hazard is significant the safety hierarchy of elimination, isolation, and minimisation must be followed.

Elimination is only possible in formation of research and teaching protocols. That principle is actively followed in the Three Rs (replacement, reduction and refinement) as detailed by [The Australian and New Zealand Council for the Care of Animals in Research and Teaching Ltd \(ANZCCART\)](#). Within Massey University these principles are upheld by the Massey University Animal Ethics Committee (MUAEC) with technical support from [Animal Welfare Science and Bioethics Centre](#). The safety strategy of isolation in the human animal interface, is akin to abandonment and not a tenable option. As a teaching and research organisation majoring in biological and food sciences, with an active veterinary teaching hospital there will always be a need for euthanasia. Given that, the legal safety requirement is that staff members are monitored for the impact of this intrinsically stressful hazard.

Monitoring requires an underpinning principle of facilitated self regulation, which is assumed in these recommendations. Put another way, it is OK to say euthanasia is getting to you, and in particular you let your supervisor know. The institution and its operational units, the people involved in protocols involving euthanasia especially the chief applicants and the staff who are line managers have responsibilities for those directly involved in euthanasia.

The guideline details recommended practice in three sections of:

- (a) The institutional culture including responsibility for the impacts on staff,

- (b) Competency in the euthanasia tasks and skills required, and
- (c) Assurance of the necessity of euthanasia and recognition of the outcomes.

Appendix 1 details coping strategies from Baran's et al (2009) paper. It is recommended this is used as a handout to support staff as to the range of coping strategies in dealing with stress from euthanasia.

A: Institutional culture including responsibility for the impacts on all staff.

Heads of Institute through line managers need to ensure that; Chief applicants on protocols approved by MUAEC¹ accept full responsibility for the safe, humane and efficient euthanasia of animals. This can be achieved by:

- Chief applicants must ensure that all staff involved are fully informed about the purposes, are properly trained and competent, and that procedures are carried out correctly.
- Chief applicants must be aware of the potential impacts on the well being of staff involved and be sensitive and responsive to these.
- Chief applicants must be aware of the resources available at departmental, institute and University levels to assist them in fulfilling these responsibilities

Heads of Institute through line managers are responsible for identifying those staff who show high stress responses to euthanasia and for taking appropriate actions for ongoing assessment and risk management.

- Assessment of euthanasia stress in staff as part of their normal day to day interactions with staff and formally during the Performance Review Process. The web document [Responding to a Stress Concern](#) gives tips on how to proceed if the staff member needs support.
 - Alternatively where staff undertake euthanasia on a non-routine basis, there should be a post procedure interview, debrief, or support meeting for staff involved in euthanasia to check on staff stress as a result of euthanasia aspect of the research.
- Supporting staff by referral to empathetic and knowledgeable people to whom staff can go, in confidence, to vent their feelings, debrief or download.
- For initial support encourage where necessary staff to seek professional assistance via the Employee Assistance Program.
- Ongoing professional assistance is available from School of Psychology, via College of Sciences Human Resources Advisor.
- Supporting use of Sick and Discretionary leave to ensure that where appropriate as a coping strategy affected employees take time off or time out from duties when showing signs of strain as a result of euthanasia.
- Using and being aware of other staff who are less stressed by euthanasia, who may be available to undertake euthanasia procedures for affected staff.
- Exit interviews for staff involved in euthanasia should seek from them if the euthanasia procedures were a part of their reasons for leaving.

¹ MUAEC = Massey University Animal Ethics Committee

B Competency in euthanasia tasks and skills required.

Chief applicants are to ensure adequate training is given to staff before they are involved in any euthanasia. Competency must be assessed (preferably by a veterinarian), and written record of certification² of that person in the particular technique, e.g. anesthetic overdose of dogs.

The scope of training should cover:

- Ethical and reasons for animal euthanasia including research purpose
- 3Rs program
- Preparing for euthanasia
- Species, appropriate techniques for life stage
- Verification of correct techniques
- Alternative techniques
- Coping with euthanasia related stress

Assistance with content can be obtained from [Animal Welfare Science and Bioethics Centre](#), [The Australian and New Zealand Council for the Care of Animals in Research and Teaching Ltd](#) and [Australian and New Zealand Laboratory Animal Association](#)

C Necessity of euthanasia and recognition of the benefits to animals and people.

The following initiatives will be established as resources and opportunities become available:

- A euthanasia section in a research forum to outline University research into impacts on staff of euthanasia and review consequential steps now taken by the Colleges and the University.
- An open forum to highlight the benefits to animals and people from the euthanasia protocols undertaken.
- Support discussion groups for staff involved in euthanasia share reactions, coping strategies and informal sharing of best practice.

Acknowledgments and references

I would acknowledge the work and advice of concerned senior staff in the Institute of Food Nutrition and Human Health and Institute of Veterinary Animal and Biomedical Sciences, Massey University in providing the information for this guideline.

² A record of staff training and competency assessment must be kept. These can be notified to HR services desk for recording in Human Resource Information System. The person doing the training and their competency to train and certify competence should also be supplied.

References

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- Sanders C.R. 2010. *Working out back: the veterinary technician and "Dirty work"*. Journal of Contemporary Ethnography 39:243
- Stafford K.J., McKelvey, K., Budge, C. 2001. *How does euthanasia affect people and how do they cope?* Newsletter of the Companion Animal Society of the New Zealand Veterinary Association 11: 7-14.

Appendix 1: Various coping strategies for dealing with euthanasia-related strain by experienced workers directly responsible for euthanasia of animals.

(Taken from Table 1 from Baran's et al paper. Based on a survey of animal shelter employees from 62 US animal shelters n = 242). The question regarding coping strategy was open ended and yielded 342 responses that were subsequently grouped into the 26 categories below.

Coping category	Percentage of workers	Examples of actual survey responses
Vent your feelings	15.7	Cry. Get your feelings out. Talk about your feelings.
Alter your emotional attachment level	15.3	Do not get attached to any animal. Not to take things personally, but still have compassion. Do not become uncaring ... Do not build up a wall. Treat each one as you would your own.
Know that euthanasia is sometimes the best option	14.1	Try to remember that they're not getting hit by cars or slowly starving to death. The animal is better to be euthanized than to possibly go to a home where they might be mistreated or thrown out on the street to fend for themselves.
Take it slow	11.6	I would tell them to let me know when they are ready to do it. Go slowly—don't just block your mind and tell yourself you can handle it.
Seek education and training	11.2	First thing I tell them is to read the "12 imperative steps" of a euthanasia tech. Make sure you understand the goals/mission of your organization.
Don't blame yourself	11.2	You're not the bad person. You're doing all you can to help the situation. Know that it is not our fault
Get a different job if necessary	8.3	Do not work here unless you want to. Don't get involved at all if you can't deal with it ... Not just anyone can do this job.
Know that the job is not for everyone	7.4	Either the numbers (which bother me) or certain type or certain animals will bother you. Very hard physically too. A person must have a "thick hide" to handle this job. Either you have it or you don't.
Understand that euthanasia is part of the job	5.8	Realizing that in most shelters, euthanizing does occur at some point in the job. Knowing that euthanizing an animal is ... more humane than letting it live in misery.
Get informed on the reality of sheltered animals and overpopulation	5.0	Understand why we euthanize and the consequences if we do not euthanize the stray animals. Get informed about the reality of sheltered animals and overpopulation.
Talk to and comfort the animals during euthanasia	5.0	Just make sure the animal is as comfortable as possible while putting it to sleep. Give them very tender and loving arms to take their last breath with.
Get a different job (categorically)	5.0	Find another job that does not involve euthanasia of animals. Find a different career. I felt I would be able to help animals; instead I spend time cleaning up their poop and killing them.
Acknowledge your feelings	4.1	Be honest with yourself about the real effect on you. Notice emotions even if you hold them in.
Keep work separate from personal life	4.1	Do not take your job home with you, and keep it out of your personal life. Not take it home, try not to think about it too much.
Focus on success	4.1	Remember that there are wonderful people who care for their animals very well. Focus on adoptable animals; give them a better chance of getting out alive!
Communicate with management	3.3	Discuss your feelings with management. Discuss your feelings with your about concerns supervisor and have an open and honest relationship with him/her.
Practice proper euthanasia techniques	2.9	Become extremely proficient at the task (physically). Focus on the technical aspects of proper administration of euthanasia.

Learn about and promote responsible pet ownership	2.9	Let people know to neuter and spay their pets and to look for their lost pets at shelters. Preach spaying and neutering; someone might hear you and tell a friend.
Meditate, pray, or reflect	2.5	Say a prayer before you start your job.
Seek a diversion	2.1	Find a hobby ... It helps take your mind off of what you had to do. Shoot pool, start a collection, and plan hiking or camping/fishing trips.
Have someone else euthanize special pets	2.1	Do not ever euthanize an animal you are attached to—have someone else do it.
Seek external help	1.2	Seek counseling, seek counseling, seek counseling. Always ask for help.
Be confident in your training and abilities	0.8	You should always be confident in your skill, training, and decision making.
Take pride in your work	0.8	Be proud if you are a good euthanasia tech.
Don't euthanize large amounts at same time	0.4	Don't euthanize large amounts at 1 time.
Keep the euthanasia room neat	0.4	Keep the room neat. It helps if you do not hate to be in that room.