

# Grief for animal companions and an approach to supporting their bereaved owners



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**Abstract:** Bereavement as a result of pet or animal companion loss is a common experience but despite the evident bond between humans and their animal companions there is relatively little provision for bereaved owners. This article presents an overview of grief for animal companions and current approaches to bereavement support for bereaved owners. It presents a new resource developed by the author that helps vets introduce the topic with their bereaved clients and signpost them to further sources of information and support.

**Keywords:** animal companions, pet loss, veterinary practices

## Introduction

The popularity of animal companionship in the UK is well known and is born out in statistics and market efforts. In 2013, approximately 13 million UK households (45%) included at least one animal companion, totalling about 23.2 million animals excluding fish (Pet Food Manufacturers Association, 2013). In addition, many veterinary practices and wider industry emphasise this evident bond between humans and their animal companions as a way to market animal care and related goods and services. However, when the animal's death ruptures the bond, there is relatively little provision for bereaved owners. Despite this, most veterinary practices overlook bereavement support for clients (and the strain that veterinarians can experience as agents of bereavement – through euthanasia – who also feel responsible for supporting the bereaved).

In this paper, I present a practical overview of grief for animal companions in the context of euthanasia of owned animals in veterinary clinics. I also outline current approaches to grief support for bereaved owners, and describe a new resource I have developed to help vets to bridge the gap with their bereaved clients more easily.

## Terminology

I use the following terms:

- Animal companions (ACs): animals kept as companions to humans and generally of domesticated species. Commonly dogs, cats, horses, rabbits, smaller mammals, birds and reptiles, and excluding fish. I avoid the term 'pet' in this paper because it does not adequately reflect the current scientific understanding of animals' sentience, cognitive complexity and individuality, or the complexity and modern reality of the relationships between animals and their owners (Fraser, 2008).
- Grief: the behavioural, social, psychological and emotional reactions that a person has in response to the rupture or ending of a significant relationship with another (after Casarett, Kutner & Abrahm, 2001).
- Animal companion bereavement: the period following the death of an animal companion during which grief may be experienced and mourning may occur (after Casarett, Kutner & Abrahm, 2001).

## Number of people grieving for animal companions

Some bereaved owners may not experience grief following the death or other loss of their AC. However, most seem to experience grief in some form. Extrapolating from the available data, it may be that comparable annual numbers of people are bereaved as a result of an animal death as of a human death (Table 1): at least two million in each case, and possibly much more in either or both. I make that comparison neither to privilege nor to trivialise the grief of either group, but only to demonstrate that grief for ACs is not rare. While many bereaved owners may experience grief for less time than other bereaved people, the pain is nevertheless real and deeply felt (See box) sometimes with negative outcomes such as 'high' depressive symptomatology (Stallones, 1994), complicated grief (Adrian, Deliramich & Frueh, 2009) and, in cases I have encountered, extreme social isolation and resumption of smoking. The following section outlines key points pertaining to adult AC owners.

## Grief for animal companions

An exhaustive review is beyond the scope of this paper. Henry (2008), Chur-Hansen (2010), Crossley (2013) and Sable (2013) provide summaries of current knowledge. Briefly, grief for ACs continues to be understood in the context of attachment theory (Adams, Bonnett & Meek, 1999; Henry, 2008; Peacock, Chur-Hansen & Winefield, 2012; Sable, 2013). That is, owners are attached to their ACs because the relationship provides similar benefits to close human relationships. Thus, ACs may be described as 'fictive kin' and many owners would describe them as full members of their family (Sable, 2013; Wilson & Netting, 2013). When an AC dies, grief is a spontaneous and normal response that enables the bereaved to adapt to life without their animal. Adams, Bonnett & Meek's (1999) detailed interviews with bereaved Canadian owners indicated that, in those participants and as with human bereavement (Neimeyer *et al*, 2010), grief for ACs may be understood as a search for meaning. However, it seems reasonable also that, in some or possibly all cases, grief for ACs may be partly a stress response.

**Table 1:** Comparative estimates of the probable numbers of people in the UK who suffer AC bereavement (through euthanasia at veterinary clinics) and human bereavement in any one year

### Bereavement caused by the euthanasia of animal companions (ACs)

Approximate annual number of euthanasias per full-time, small animal veterinarian	100
Approximate number of full-time, small animal veterinarians (or full-time equivalent) in GB (Buzzeo, Robinson & Williams, 2014)	15,000
Approximate number of ACs euthanased in GB veterinary practices annually	1,500,000

**Total number of persons bereaved by AC euthanasia each year (assuming 2 per euthanasia) 3,000,000<sup>1</sup>**

### Human bereavement

Number of human deaths in England and Wales (Office of National Statistics, 2013)	499,331
Number of human deaths in Scotland (General Register Office for Scotland, 2014)	54,700
Number of human deaths in Northern Ireland in (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2014)	14,756
Approximate annual human mortality in UK	568,787

**Total number of persons bereaved by human death (assuming 4 per death) 2,275,148<sup>1</sup>**  
(SECOB Project Research Group, 2013)

<sup>1</sup> Estimate is extrapolated from data available at the time of writing. In the absence of known bereavement statistics, it provides a guide to current possible figures but is not presented as a definitive statistic.

## The experience of AC bereavement

Demographic details are provided where known, or confidentiality allows.

Comments quoted in grief support pack *The Loss of Your Pet* (Hewson 2013):

- 'I was completely unprepared for the almost paralysing grief that I felt.' Woman
- 'Many people just don't understand how hard it is when your pet dies. This can make you feel silly.' Man
- 'He was my dear old dad's dog. Losing him was like losing Dad all over again.' Man

Comments sent to the author during development of *The Loss of Your Pet* (Hewson 2013):

- 'I've had animal companions all my life and cannot describe the emptiness you feel when they are euthanased.' Café proprietor, male
- 'I could never have predicted the distress I felt for weeks after my partner's dog was killed in a road accident.' Senior executive, male
- After her horse got out and was hit by a car: '(T)he feelings of anger and injustice I also felt in addition to shock, raw grief, disbelief and heartbreaking loss. [...] There are real phases of grief and what I've learnt is to embrace them all, whenever they come; sometimes it comes out of the blue and can really take your breath away, other times something obvious prompts it but you're more ready for it.' Financial services employee, female
- 'You're reluctant to meet people /talk about it largely because you know you will get emotional and tearful. I thought I might be going mad.' Business owner, female
- 'I will never forget earlier this year we had relatives visiting from overseas that are not particularly animal orientated. It was only a few weeks after losing my dog and [...] the first thing they said when I walked in the room was "Oh smile!" Of course, I promptly burst into tears and ran out the room.' Woman

Comments reported by other authors:

- 'My family had a cat before I was born and he was like a part of the family. He died when I was about 13 and we all grieved for him for a long time. It was like losing a friend.' Computer programmer, female, 38, cohabiting; cited in Charles (2014).
- 'By careful calibration with other deaths, I can report that we found it as upsetting as the deaths of human, including friends and family members.' Research consultant, male, 62, married; cited in Charles (2014)
- '...you go through periods of ok-ness as I call it, you put on a front, as long as you can, because society doesn't want to see you crying...'. Cited in Adams, Bonnett & Meek (1999).
- '...crying at inappropriate places. I'm crying at work, crying everywhere.' Woman; cited in Crossley (2013).
- 'It is really distressing because . . . oh, just everything . . . going to the market, not having him there, running errands. ...I can't go to the beach yet, but going to the park even walking down the street was hard. I think about him all the time, and everything is a memory. And it's distressing because he's not there.' Man; cited in Packman, Carmack & Ronen (2012).

Bereaved AC owners commonly have four particular difficulties:

### 1. Lack of societal understanding

Similar to the case of parents who suffer the miscarriage of their baby, grief for ACs may be described as 'disenfranchised' (however simplistic such categorisation may perhaps be (Robson & Walter, 2012)). That is, society sets expectations of how we behave, and there is no collective support or understanding for expressions of grief when an AC dies (Adams, Bonnett & Meek, 1999; Chur-Hansen, 2010; Morris, 2012). This is not surprising in light of the general 'endemic silence around grief and bereavement' (Royal College of Nursing Scotland, 2010) and societal disagreement about how we should relate to non-human animals (eg. some people eat meat while others are vegan, and many people dislike dogs, cats and other companion animal species) (Fraser, 2008).

### 2. Guilt following euthanasia

In my professional experience and, anecdotally, that of many veterinary personnel, feelings of guilt are a common and distressing sequel to an owner's decision to have their AC euthanased. This is supported by research from Canada (Adams, Bonnett & Meek, 1999, 2000), the US (Morris, 2012) and the UK (Dawson & Campbell, 2009). From their interviews with a self-selected group of 19 highly attached AC owners, Dawson & Campbell (2009) described an emerging concept of *responsibility grief* (Dawson, 2010) where the highly-attached owner's strong senses of responsibility and care throughout their AC's life become transformed into deeply distressing feelings of profound guilt at having in some way betrayed their contract of care, through the decision of euthanasia.

Other contributors to the guilt that may be felt after euthanasia can include:

- How the attending veterinarian broke the bad news and helped the owner reach an informed decision for euthanasia (Shaw & Lagoni, 2007; Pilgram, 2010; Morris, 2012);
- The influence of financial constraints in the decision (also a source of stress to veterinary personnel (Yeates, 2009; Batchelor & McKeegan, 2012)).
- The owner's knowledge that they may have contributed, however unintentionally, to the circumstances that have led to euthanasia (Henry, 2008; Dawson, 2010). For example: delay in taking out veterinary insurance; persisting in feeding an imbalanced diet despite veterinary advice; failing to ensure that their animal could not get in harm's way.
- Doubt over whether the decision to euthanase was right for the animal or made at the right time (Adams, Bonnett & Meek, 1999). Due to lack of training, most veterinarians are, in my experience, unaware that telling their client of the impending or immediate need for euthanasia may precipitate not only sadness and fear of loss, but ongoing grief in the knowledge that they are going to be bereft. Research is needed but these reactions, particularly the sense of unreality that grief may create, seem likely to explain some cases where clients continue to withhold consent for what the veterinarian judges to be timely euthanasia. That situation can then create conflict and significant stress for both parties (Batchelor & McKeegan, 2012). The vet is professionally obliged to press for euthanasia on humane grounds, but is not typically trained in such communication and may therefore seem unfeeling or domineering to their client. The client may find the recommendation for euthanasia impossible to assimilate, resent the vet for persisting in that recommendation (Remillard *et al*, 2013), and experience guilt for having consented.

This brief overview of the guilt that owners may feel after euthanasia does not mean that persons whose animals die in other ways than euthanasia suffer less grief. Two Canadian studies found that euthanasia did not seem to contribute to the intensity of grief, unless the owner was highly attached (Adams, Bonnett & Meek 2000; McCutcheon & Fleming 2001). This suggests that, for many owners, the sense of loss created when their ACs die may be independent of the manner of death, but that euthanasia can create the added burden of moral unease which, in highly bonded owners, can lead to responsibility grief. Dawson (2010) gives recommendations for how veterinary personnel can manage euthanasias so as to minimise the risk of responsibility grief.

### 3. Animal as link to other significant relationships or experiences

Many veterinary personnel have reported that bereaved clients confide that their dead AC was a last link to a deceased or absent family member. The deaths of such animals may trigger additional

grief for the associated human losses. In other cases, the animal was not a direct link to another person, but their death may trigger grief from earlier painful events, including childhood sexual abuse (Taylor & Breen, 2013) or domestic violence (Ascione & Arkow, 2000; Linzey, 2009).

### 4. Frequency of bereavement

The commonest companion animal species have much shorter lifespans than we do, ranging approximately from 18 months (hamsters) to seven years (rabbits and some giant breeds of dog) to 13 years (many dogs and cats) to 20 years (some cats). For many animal owners, especially those with more than one AC, this means experiencing bereavement more frequently than is the case with human loved ones.

These four particular pressures may compound a bereaved AC owner's grief, especially because their distress may seem like an over-reaction to those around them. At work or in the family, others may remark accordingly eg. 'It was only a hamster'; 'Get over it!'. Such remarks can cause the bereaved owner further distress, and engender a sense of shame for the grief. In an interview on BBC Radio 4's Today, Pamela Burne-Jones of the Blue Cross's Pet Bereavement Support Service reported that many of the ~6,000 bereaved owners who use the Service annually reported taking time off work due to fear of the social difficulties above (Burne Jones, 2013). In my experience, a significant minority of clients take off from 24 hours to five days or longer.

Other factors that may also shape a bereaved owner's experience of grief include:

### 5. Personal and demographic factors

These inter-related factors include gender, health status, age, domestic circumstances and social support; their roles are reviewed in detail elsewhere (Henry, 2008; Chur-Hansen, 2010; Merrill, 2012). As with human bereavement, it is important not to make assumptions about who can or cannot cope based on personal and demographic factors (Chur-Hansen, 2010) but to take into account individual coping styles (Relf, Machin & Archer, 2010). For example, many veterinary personnel express particular concern for how the single, elderly, bereaved owner may cope following euthanasia of their AC, but articulate less concern for younger and apparently very composed owners. However, an elderly person living alone may have the life experience to take a more pragmatic and self-healing approach to the death of their AC, while a younger adult may lack the experience, social support, or self-knowledge to cope as readily (McCutcheon & Fleming, 2001). Moreover, in either case, the converse might be true eg. with the bereaved elderly person now feeling entirely isolated and confronted with their imminent mortality, and the younger person having better social support.

This example of the assumptions that can be made about grieving clients by veterinary personnel illustrates the need for education, and for development of a valid method by which veterinary practices or their delegates might support clients

in identifying their grief support needs in the days or weeks following AC death and accessing individually appropriate and effective support.

A further factor which can compound the grief arising from the death or other loss of an AC is any human loss that may have occurred relatively close in time, including loss of a job or health. Such stressful life events are known to increase vulnerability following human bereavement and are likely to do so in AC bereavement. In a survey of 120 bereaved clients at a veterinary teaching hospital, Stallones (1994) found that higher scores on recent negative life changes predicted higher depressive symptomatology following AC deaths. However, other research indicates that attachment factors and preventability of death may be more important in predicting a bereaved owner's ability to cope (Henry, 2008; Crossley, 2013).

## 6. Coping styles

A detailed review of grief theory and models is beyond the scope of this paper. To my knowledge, such models have not been fully developed or tested in the case of AC bereavement. Dawson and Campbell (2009) noted 'there is an absence of empirical evidence to support application of these (human bereavement) models' in AC bereavement. Adams, Bonnett and Meek (1999) provided a candidate AC model, based on interviews with 44 newly bereaved owners in Ontario. They concluded that 'people's reactions are best described as a social and psychological search for meaning'. Those authors found the participants' searches were affected by the attitudes towards animals of veterinary personnel and society. The net result was 'self-governed grief' whereby participants tried to control or hide their emotions and rationalise their animals' deaths (Adams, Bonnett and Meek, 1999).

Notwithstanding Dawson and Campbell's (2009) concern above, the Range of Response to Loss model (Machin 2001), cited by Relf, Machin & Archer (2010) might also be useful in AC bereavement because of its focus on individual adaptability. In this model, the bereaved may respond to loss either by being primarily *overwhelmed* by their feelings or by seeking to control their feelings and emphasising a need for remaining active and being stoical. The model proposed by Adams, Bonnett & Meek (1999) and my clinical experience suggest that the latter, controlled response might be common or even over-represented among bereaved AC owners.

Continuing with the Range of Response to Loss model: more *resilient* people are able to use their internal and external resources, and acknowledge the impact of their loss while maintaining hope for the future. More *vulnerable* people are likely to be more pessimistic about their future and either overwhelmed by their feelings or highly anxious about expressing strong feelings.

A further, separate point is that some bereaved people may have a sense of having a continuing bond with their AC, which largely gives them comfort (Dawson, Campbell & Johnson (2004) cited in Dawson & Campbell, 2009; Packman, Carmack & Ronen, 2012; Crossley, 2013).

## 7. Loss being sudden or unexpected

Empirically, the sudden, unexpected death of ACs may be relatively more common than sudden unexpected human death, because of road traffic accidents, attacks by other animals, and some medical conditions (eg. pulmonary thrombo-embolism in cats). In any case, as with sudden unexpected human bereavement, such loss of an AC can compound an owner's grief and, in some cases, has resulted in confirmed post-traumatic stress disorder (McCutcheon & Fleming, 2001; Chur-Hansen 2010; Watters, Ruff & Weyer Jamora, 2013). Other effects of AC bereavement on owners' health are outlined next.

## Effects of animal companion bereavement on owners' mental and physical health

In my experience and that reported in discussions with other veterinary personnel, some owners adopt unhealthy behaviours, such as resumption of smoking or increased alcohol use, or suffer reduced health, such as depression, after the death of their AC. The academic literature warns of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (Chur-Hansen 2010; Watters, Ruff & Weyer Jamora, 2013) with the following groups potentially being at higher risk of negative outcomes: owners whose attachment bonds are very strong (Henry 2008, Peacock, Chur-Hansen & Winefield, 2012) or insecure (Field et al, 2009); owners experiencing concurrent or recent negative life changes (eg. Stallones 1994); and those who experienced abuse in childhood (Taylor & Breen, 2013).

It also seems likely that, as with human bereavement, some bereaved owners may experience long-term dysfunction and persistent severe distress, characterised by yearning, preoccupation with the deceased, lack of acceptance of their death, maladaptive coping behaviours and adverse health reactions (Casarett, Kutner & Abraham, 2001; Kersting & Wagner, 2012; McCallum & Bryant 2013). Again, further research is needed.

This brief overview has outlined the main and diverse factors that may affect a bereaved AC owner's ability to live with their loss and adapt to life without their companion. I now describe the types of support currently available to bereaved owners.

## Sources of support for bereaved owners

Many bereaved AC owners will not need particular support or intervention, as with human bereavement (Stroebe, Schut & Stroebe, 2007). Others may need help, however. Veterinary professional support for them seems to be more developed in North America than in the UK, with an extensive textbook published by one of the main American veterinary associations and now in its second edition (Lagoni & Durrance, 2011). Grief support also seems to receive more attention at many of the North American veterinary schools than at those in the UK, with several of the former operating a telephone helpline run by the students. In parallel, the field of veterinary social work has emerged as a formal discipline eg. at the University of Tennessee,

and community-based, AC-loss support groups are relatively common in the USA.

In the UK, the grief support resource offered most commonly by veterinary practices is a leaflet about the Pet Bereavement Support Service. The Service is run by an animal charity and provides confidential support through email and by telephone, by trained and supported volunteers who have also experienced AC bereavement (Blue Cross, 2014). Many veterinary practices make leaflets about the Service, and other third-party leaflets about grief, available in their waiting rooms or offer them directly to bereaved clients.

As in the USA, many veterinary practices in the UK send condolence cards to their bereaved clients, and some offer a memorial book or online memorial 'wall'. Some veterinary practices may have books about AC loss for their bereaved clients to borrow. Practices may also have information about other internet-based and material resources.

Some practices provide details of bereavement counsellors who specialise in AC loss. However, because most veterinary personnel lack training in grief and related issues, they may not realise that counsellors should be registered with the British Association of Counselling Psychologists. Others offering counselling services may not have had adequate training.

A small minority of UK practices make grief support an explicit part of their own service, through trained employees. However, in addition to the concern just mentioned, these practices' well-intentioned offerings can be prescriptive if they imply that talking to someone is the best way to cope with grief. While their websites' clear acknowledgement of grief and the possibility of support are far ahead of most UK practices', they may unintentionally exclude bereaved clients who are 'controlled' grievers under Machin's model (Relf, Archer & Machin, 2010). Those clients are likely to be self-reliant and thus may not wish to talk to others but would welcome information about self-help resources. Therefore veterinary practices need to be informed and their personnel trained if they are to respond optimally to their clients' loss and grief.

In general, the current support efforts of most UK veterinary practices seem to fall short of the National Institute for Clinical Excellence's guidance on supportive and palliative care, which states: 'Family members and carers should be made aware of, and have easy access to, sources of local information, advice and support designed to meet their own needs' (my emphasis) (National Institute for Clinical Excellence, 2004). Similar to bereaved people generally, many bereaved owners likewise 'have virtually no contact with professionals, leading to professionals making erroneous assumptions about their coping and often leaving families and carers unaware of additional resources, services or sources of support' (National Institute for Clinical Excellence, 2004).

To my knowledge, most veterinary professionals are unaware of these points. Potential reasons why they may make 'erroneous assumptions' about their bereaved clients and leave them 'unaware of additional resources' include the following, many of which may be inter-related:

- Most veterinary personnel have not been trained in grief and its course. Consequently, many:
  - Do not appreciate that their clients may suffer because grief for animals is disenfranchised;
  - Do not know what to say to grieving clients;
  - Fear embarrassing themselves or the client, and thus losing the client.
- I estimate that companion-animal veterinarians in first-opinion practice encounter at least 100 deaths annually (Table 1). Thus, veterinary personnel are very accustomed to animal death – being agents of it and sometimes euthanasing two or three animals in one day, in my experience. As a coping strategy, veterinarians may detach themselves so that they do not appreciate fully the impact of an animal's death on a client. In contrast to this, some of their clients are not only grieved by the death of their AC but find their involvement in euthanasia, whether the consent or witnessing the event, can add considerably to their distress (Dawson and Campbell 2009). By overlooking all this through detachment, vets may be better able to resolve their own inner conflicts at (i) having been unable to restore an animal to health, (ii) having caused bereavement, and (iii) feeling reluctant or unable to offer grief support.
- Many clients trivialise their grief to veterinary personnel eg. apologising for their tears or describing themselves as 'silly', 'stupid' etc.
- The lack of comprehensive or evidence-based grief support resources.
- The misperception that any form of grief support necessarily involves more time, personnel and non-recoverable financial cost.
- Fear that to allude to or normalise clients' grief would pathologise it, although I am not aware of any anecdotal or research evidence to support such fear.
- Most bereaved clients do not discuss their grief with their vet, nor would many seem to want to. Among the potential reasons for this are: they wish to keep their experience private; they know that their vets are neither human healthcare professionals nor their confidants; and they fear the stigma of admitting their distress. That is not to say that such clients would not welcome the offer of support but only that, in my experience, few ask for it.
- The governing body for veterinarians does not advise that offering initial grief support or information about resources is good practice in the period following an animal's death (Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, 2014).
- Some veterinarians and their staff admit they prefer working with animals than with people. They may find it particularly awkward to engage with grieving clients.
- Societal taboo on discussions of death and grief generally.

I now conclude on a more positive note, outlining constructive developments of sources of support for bereaved AC owners in the UK.

## Developments for grieving owners

Societal norms around the expression of grief for dead (or otherwise lost) ACs are starting to change in the UK and elsewhere (Gustavsson, 2013; Wilson & Netting, 2013). There are now online memorials and newspaper announcements, and AC crematoria that offer services and gardens of remembrance are already a norm. Veterinary hospice care continues to develop, including practices dedicated to providing at-home euthanasias. There is also an international network of photographers who offer those with terminally ill ACs a special session to photograph the animals.

### The Loss of Your Pet

In response to the need I witnessed while working in first-opinion veterinary practice, I created a resource to help veterinary practices support their bereaved clients (Hewson 2013). *The Loss of Your Pet* is a resource comprising client-care packs, staff training, and copy about grief and grief support for use on the practice's website and in their newsletters. The resource is targeted at veterinary clinics, for them to pass on to their clients, and is not promoted directly to the public.

The client-care pack comprises a booklet and CD providing narration and brief accompanying text that 'signpost' bereaved owners through their grief. The content does not imply that grief is linear and stresses that it is both normal and an experiential process unique to the individual. The booklet includes quotes from bereaved owners (see box), space for notes, and a list of further resources. The packs are intended to:

- Help normalise and honour AC owners' feelings of grief;
- 'Show, not tell' the common feelings of grief that may be experienced and different ways of coping with them. This includes the cases of remaining non-human animals, children, and those living alone;
- Reassure the bereaved that they are not alone; and
- Empower them to seek further appropriate support, if desired.

The pack was developed and tested, on a purposive sample of six veterinary personnel and 10 animal owners who had lost their AC in recent weeks or longer ago. Comments (see box) and suggestions were provided by email using open- and closed-ended questions; changes were incorporated accordingly. Nine practices are now using the packs and three are trialling them. Initial feedback to date indicates:

- they are helping veterinary personnel have more peace of mind about their client-care
- most of their clients accept the packs when they are offered, with some expressing appreciation and (to date), no complaints to practices or the author afterwards.

*The Loss of Your Pet* coincides with an emerging professional recognition of the needs of bereaved owners. For example, in January 2014, the North American Veterinary Conference

included a full day of lectures on the topics of the euthanasia consultation and client support (NAVCA, 2014). Lectures on these topics are in turn planned for the London Vet Show in November 2014, and the annual meeting of the Society for Practising Veterinary Surgeons in January 2015. This slow but growing engagement by the veterinary profession complements pre-existing external efforts to help practices offer grief support (eg. veterinary educational initiatives by the Society for Companion Animal Studies, Our Special Friends and the continuing professional development group CPD Solutions).

### Concluding remarks

Many people suffer grief from AC bereavement annually. While AC owners' grief may be relatively less than that following human bereavement, it may still be deeply felt, can trigger other grief, and has little societal recognition and understanding. As with human bereavement, many bereaved owners have sufficient social support and inner resilience to cope. However, others may struggle to cope and experience on-going distress. We lack the research needed to understand the implications of this and to know the most effective approaches to the support of grieving owners. At a minimum, a pragmatic approach would normalise grief for ACs, and ensure that all newly bereaved owners had information about support resources, so they could access support if needed. The new resource, *The Loss of Your Pet*, is intended as a part of this developing awareness, enabling practices to educate their teams and more easily bridge the bereavement support gap with their clients.

A growing number of veterinary practices, and the veterinary profession as a whole, are starting to engage more with how vets might help, for the benefit of their bereaved clients and their own personnel. ■

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