

## Fur-ever comfort: the role of normative professionalism in animal hospice and palliative care

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**Keywords:** end-of-life decision-making, qualitative research, veterinary ethics

### Introduction

In the final stages of an animal's life, questions arise about the care that is necessary for an animal in this crucial phase of life. The care activities can focus on 'curing' if an animal suffers from a treatable illness. In addition, palliative interventions can be implemented to support the animal during treatment, such as pain medication or custom-tailored nutrition. If curing is not possible or (no longer) desirable, care can also be purely focused on 'palliation' (Springer and Flammer, 2021). Palliation can encompass both palliative care as well as hospice care. Although the definitions of both palliative care and hospice care are continuously debated and refined in the literature (Downing *et al.*, 2011; Selter *et al.*, 2022; Shanan and Shearer, 2023; Villalobos, 2011), two key aspects incorporated in palliative care can be deduced. First, optimisation of the patient's comfort and minimising the patient's suffering throughout all stages of the disease based on the goals of medical care as prioritized in consultation with the animal's caregiver(s), and second, attending to the social, emotional, and spiritual needs of both the animal patient and the caregiver(s), alongside the treatment of animal's physical discomfort (Shanan and Shearer, 2023). As these key aspects show, palliative care can be provided throughout all disease stages. In contrast, hospice care is specifically focused on and provided during the terminal stage of illness near death. Because of the life stage in which hospice care is provided, the key aspects of palliative care naturally extend beyond enhancing an animal's quality of life during illness to encompass the entire dying process.

As the two key aspects of animal hospice and palliative care show, the chosen care is tailored to the (perceived) needs of the animal and those needed by the animal caregiver(s). When selecting interventions that best suit the needs of both the animal and the animal caregiver, animal-specific and animal-caregiver-specific characteristics are taken into consideration (August, 2023). Relevant animal-specific characteristics include but are not limited to, the patient's symptoms, the tolerability of possible side effects of medication or other treatments, and the temperament of the animal considered in conjunction with the acceptability of the provided care. When considering the animal caregiver(s), relevant characteristics can be related to practical and personal aspects. Practical aspects include but are not limited to, the feasibility of providing care and the caregiver's capabilities, such as finances. Personal aspects encompass the challenges associated with caregiving, involving resilience required when caring for an animal reaching the end of life. Additionally, it includes personal beliefs about animal welfare and animal death.

Like animal caregivers, professional animal care providers such as veterinarians and veterinary nurses have their own perspectives, beliefs and resilience when delivering end-of-life care. An example of such a belief could be the professional's stance on whether euthanasia or hospice-supported natural death is considered the most suitable option (Shanan and Shearer, 2023). Such an end-of-life-related belief can vary among professionals and may differ for each professional depending on the situation. These

kinds of personal beliefs of professionals influence the care provided. Building upon the example of a professional's stance on whether euthanasia or hospice-supported natural death, it is likely that a veterinarian who passionately believes that euthanasia is a preferable option for animals over hospice-supported natural death will advise in favour of euthanasia. Depending on the professional, it may even be the case that the alternative of hospice-supported natural death is hardly discussed or considered to be entirely out of the question. This indicates that the beliefs and perspectives of veterinarians and veterinary nurses play a significant role in how animal hospice and palliative care are discussed and provided in veterinary practice.

## **The concept of normative professionalism**

As part of professionalism, experts practice their profession not only by adhering to established standards or executing learned skills. The actions of professionals are influenced by what has been referred to as 'the soul of the professional', which 'colours' their practice in a unique way (Bakker and Coppoolse, 2022). The professional's experiences, personal values, and beliefs shape this 'soul'. When elaborating on the example of euthanasia versus hospice-supported natural death, a professional's stance may be influenced by religion, which convinces the professional that ending the life of any living being belongs not in our hands. Also, individual experiences, such as a hospice-support natural death of a family member, can shape the professional's soul.

The impact of the professional's soul on the professional's view on what is seen as 'good practice' and consequently their professional behaviour has been discussed in various disciplines. Literature suggests that professionals are generally unaware of how their experiences, values and beliefs influence their professional practice. The process of becoming aware of how personal experiences, values, and beliefs shape one's professional perspective on 'good practice' and consequently their professional practice, is captured in the concept of 'normative professionalism' (Bakker and Coppoolse, 2022). In addition to addressing the influence of the professional's soul on their perception of 'good practice' and their professional behaviour, the concept also delves into how a professional navigates in the context of the profession (Bakker and Coppoolse, 2022). Numerous factors, such as the applicable legal framework, professional standards, and the interaction with peers within the same profession and professionals of other professions shape this context.

Applying this to the field of veterinary practice shows that empirical insights into the experiences, values and beliefs of professional animal care providers are limited. One of the few available sources is the book 'Blue Juice' by Patricia Morris. In this book, Morris provides an in-depth insight into how veterinarians in small animal practice experience euthanasia of animals. Specifically, Morris addresses the question of how practitioners weigh the needs of their clients and their patients when it comes to the ending of animal lives (Morris, 2012). Although the scope of 'Blue Juice' is specifically on euthanasia experiences and the weighing of needs, the book encompasses several observations of veterinarians' experiences, values and beliefs related to end-of-life care.

This makes this book an interesting start to understanding veterinarians' end-of-life-related experiences, values and beliefs. However, it also shows the need for a more thorough investigation is needed to understand how this affects professionals' perspective on 'good practice' within animal hospice and palliative care. Therefore, the current study aims to discuss the steps towards a more complete perspective by exploring the following additional themes: (1) a multi-stakeholder perspective of both veterinarians and veterinary nurses, (2) palliative care and hospice care, including euthanasia and (3) a focus on the professionals' perspective on 'good practice' and their practice in relation to their experiences, values and beliefs.

### Section 3

Obtaining these insights could serve three main purposes. On the level of the veterinary profession and the profession of veterinary nurses, the findings can help to reflect on ideas of 'good practice' within animal hospice and palliative care. Additionally, on the level of the individual veterinarian or veterinary nurse, the insights could help to better understand potential ethical problems and dilemmas professional animal care providers may experience when providing end-of-life care. Last, the obtained knowledge can help to understand what support could be provided to veterinarians and veterinary nurses to navigate situations that include ethical problems and dilemmas. To achieve these purposes, the following question is central in this study: how do veterinarians' and veterinary nurses' experiences, values, and beliefs influence their perception and execution of 'good practices' in providing animal hospice and palliative care?

## Research method

### Study design

The study design will be exploratory by nature. Empirical knowledge of the concept of normative professionalism among veterinarians and veterinary nurses within animal hospice and palliative care is limited. In this study we propose a mixed-method approach to investigate the research subject (the professional), aiming for an in-depth exploration. The mixed method approach ensures data triangulation by making use of three research methods: interviews, observations and a literature study (Patton, 1999). Insights from the literature study will form the basis for developing a part of the interviews (see section Semi-structured interviews).

First of all, in-depth semi-structured interviews will be used. Interviews enable the exploration of themes that are personal and sensitive. Moreover, interviews are used to research participants' experiences and the meanings they attribute to them (Tong *et al.*, 2007). Besides in-depth semi-structured interviews, observations will be embedded. Observations can be used to study social phenomena in their natural setting (Lopez and Whitehead, 2013). By combining these research methods, the main pitfalls of interviews and observations are addressed: the potential for socially desirable answers during interviews and the limitation of reflecting on the situation during observations. As a result, an in-depth understanding of the phenomena can be reached.

### Participants

To explore the research question, the following inclusion criteria for participant recruitment are determined: veterinarians and veterinary nurses working in general practice in the Netherlands, providing palliative care or hospice care. These two types of professionals are chosen as both are involved in providing palliative and/or hospice care, however, the kind of involvement in the care differs. Whereas veterinarians are predominantly engaged in determining the type of care required, veterinary nurses are more often involved in providing the care itself or supporting the caregiver in giving the care. Consequently, differences may be expected in their experiences, values, and beliefs regarding 'good practices' in animal hospice and palliative care.

Aiming to discover a diversity of responses and potential patterns in the data, the following criteria will be used to purposefully select eligible participants: (1) variety in years of working experience; (2) geographically spread throughout the Netherlands; and (3) employed in different general practices, except for cases where a veterinarian and a veterinary nurse working at the same practice. Eligible participants will be approached by email, for face-to-face interviews and workplace observations. The number of participants will be based on data saturation, i.e. when no new information is discovered.

### **Semi-structured interviews**

The study encompasses two semi-structured interviews per participant. At the start of the study, a two-part interview will focus on the general experiences, values, and beliefs of veterinarians and veterinary nurses regarding 'good practices' in providing animal hospice and palliative care. First of all, vignettes will be presented to the participants. Vignettes, also described as fictional cases, are a common qualitative method to research attitudes, perceptions, beliefs and norms of participants about a sensitive topic (Hughes and Huby, 2002). The vignettes will invite participants to reflect on the presented case, exploring how different considerations are relevant in their perspective on the case.

To develop the vignettes, existing literature in the field of end-of-life decision-making as well as animal hospice and palliative care will be used. In addition, vignettes concerning palliative and hospice care in human medicine will be explored when constructing the fictional cases (van Delden *et al.*, 2011). Once the vignettes are developed, pilot interviews with three representatives of the target participants will be held to evaluate the vignettes. Based on the feedback about the formulation and accuracy the vignettes will be adjusted to come to a final version that will be used during the interviews.

Next to the vignettes, participants will be asked to share two situations related to animal hospice or palliative care: one situation in which their experiences, values, and beliefs affected their professional position in a positive manner and one situation where they were confronted with a dilemma because of their experiences, values, and beliefs. By sharing these narratives, participants provide insight into how the participants experience the effect of their experiences, values, and beliefs on their perceptions of 'good practices' and their professional behaviour.

In addition to the interview conducted at the start of this study, another interview will be held as a follow-up to the observations. The main purpose of this interview is to specifically reflect on the situations during the observations. This reflection will focus, on the one hand, on how the professionals' perspective of 'good practice' relates to their practice experience, and on the other hand, on the potential problems or dilemmas that they may experience as a result.

### **Observations**

As mentioned, observations can be used to study social phenomena in their natural setting (Lopez and Whitehead, 2013). In this study, the aim of the observations is, as with the interviews, to obtain information on how the experiences, values, and beliefs of veterinarians and veterinary nurses influence their perception and execution of 'good practices' in providing animal hospice and palliative care. Therefore, veterinarians and veterinary nurses will be observed during their consultations in practice. Important criteria for the selected consultations are that (1) the animal patient receives palliative or hospice care; (2) the provided care is discussed during the consultation; (3) the animal caregiver(s) consent to the observation; and (4) the interaction between the veterinarian/veterinary nurse and animal caregiver(s) is expected to occur at least two more times in the coming three to six months. Important to note is that participating animal caregivers will be informed about the research and the research aims.

For this study, a 'complete observer' setup is chosen (Lopez and Whitehead, 2013). In this type of observation, the observer does not participate in the interaction with the participants but solely observes (Lopez and Whitehead, 2013). In practice, this means that the observer is in the room during the consultation. During the consultation, there is no interaction between the observer, the veterinarian/veterinary nurse and the animal caregiver(s). In total, three consultations per participant will be observed.

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In addition to these observations, permission is asked to audio record the consultation for data analysis. Audio recording is preferred over video recording as the latter may create an unsafe environment and influence the natural character desired for observations. If a participant objects to audio recording, this recording will be omitted.

During the observations, the observer will focus on the veterinarian/veterinary nurse's verbal and non-verbal communication. Regarding verbal communication, the focus will be on how the veterinarian/veterinary nurse discusses their experiences, values, and beliefs regarding end-of-life care in general or concerning the current situation. Additionally, any questions from the veterinarian/veterinary nurse towards the animal caregiver's experiences, values, and beliefs on end-of-life care will be observed. Regarding non-verbal communication, the veterinarian/veterinary nurse's gestures and mimics will be observed as well as those of the caregiver.

### Conclusion

The current paper proposes a mixed-method approach to explore the concept of normative professionalism among veterinarians and veterinary nurses involved in animal hospice and palliative care. By exploring this concept within veterinary practice, this planned study aims to: (1) stimulate reflection with both professions on ideas of 'good practice' within animal hospice and palliative care; (2) create a better understanding of potential ethical problems and dilemmas professional animal care providers may experience when providing end-of-life care; and (3) provide insight into the kind of support that could be provided to professional animal care providers in navigating in situations that include ethical problems and dilemmas.

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