Cremation Services upon the Death of a Companion Animal: Views of Service Providers and Service Users

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Abstract
There is no systematic research on the rites and rituals associated with companion animal death in modern Australian society. Three cremation service providers were interviewed and asked to consider which caretakers have their companion animals cremated. Seven people who had recently had a companion animal cremated were then asked about their views on the process. Five interrelated themes emerged from the two data sets about who uses cremation services for companion animals: “Everyone uses companion animal cremation services”; “People who consider the companion animal as a family member, as a child”; “People who want memorials for their companion animals”; “Grieving people”; and “People who seek compassion and social support.” With scant recognition of the impact of companion animal death and the role of rites and rituals in facilitating the grieving process, further research in the area is needed, including into attachment as a possible mediator.

Keywords
companion animal, grief, human-animal bond

Introduction
There is considerable literature concluding that for many people companion animals are family members (Podrazik, Shackford, Becker, & Heckert, 2000; Gage & Holcomb, 1991). Companion animals often serve as human substitutes (Morley & Fook, 2005), most notably as children. It is remarkable that, despite this, so little attention has been paid to the grief experienced when a companion animal dies (Sharkin & Knox, 2003; Wrobel & Dye, 2003). In Western cultures, mourning by adults for the loss of a companion animal tends to go unrecognized, and when it is noticed, it is generally considered undesirable or pathological (Morales, 1997). Death of a companion animal is usually not considered a significant loss (Toray, 2004), even though the animal...
was a significant other to the bereaved. Morley et al. (2005) argue that professional services have ignored the importance of the human-companion animal bond and have thus failed to address how best to support people grieving the loss of their companion animal. A specific area in which there is no systematic research is that of the rites (symbolizing the movement from one situation or state to another) and rituals (prescribed behavior) (Hendry, 1999) associated with companion animal death in modern society. Woods (2000) and Adams, Bonnett, and Meek (1999, 2000) argue that the absence of standardized funeral rituals for companion animals in Western cultures reinforces the notion that human-animal bonds are insignificant; this, they suggest, influences the grieving process.

The literature on grief, bereavement, and loss of a companion animal originates primarily in the United States (Morley et al., 2005). This is important because, while some of these data can be generalized, there will be cultural variations. In Japan, for example, companion animals are considered members of the family, as they are in Western cultures (Kenney, 2004). Rites for deceased companion animals in Japan, however, are similar but simplified forms of the rituals used for humans: a coffin; cremation; gathering the ashes and placing them in a grave or on a shelf; making an altar at home; visiting the grave; making offerings of food and incense; and holding daily, monthly, and annual memorial services (Kenney, 2004). Most people place their animal in a cemetery connected to a Buddhist temple, and a priest chants the same liturgy that is used for humans. In 2002 in central Japan there were 465 companion animal temples in operation (Planchon, Templer, Stokes, & Keller, 2002).

Culture changes across time, as well as place. There are accounts of humans and dogs buried together, for example, in the late Paleolithic period (Hirschman, 1994). In a historical paper on pet cemeteries, Howell (2002) notes that the pet cemetery emerged in Britain toward the end of the 19th century, with the first one established around 1880. In the United States, the first such cemetery dates from 1896. In Victorian Britain, bereaved caretakers hoped to be reunited with their loved companion animal in the afterlife, in heaven, which was conceived as an analogue to the earthly home and family. In the late 1800s in Britain, animals were believed to have souls and to be immortal, and passages were cited from the Bible and theological texts to support this assertion. Nevertheless, dogs were not allowed burial on consecrated ground and thus could not be interred with their human companions. The majority of people wishing to place their companion animal in a cemetery in Victorian Britain were women, middle-class, and often subscribers to feminist, spiritualist, and/or antivivisectionist views (Howell, 2002).
In current-day Australia, services can be purchased by people who wish to have their companion animal cremated and the ashes placed in an urn, interred in a pet cemetery, or taken home, perhaps with a memorial of some type. To the best of our knowledge, there are no providers who offer a formalized funeral service. Some providers will go to the bereaved person’s home to collect the remains for cremation. With no research in this area, it is not possible to know who uses such a service, their motivations for using it, or how rites and rituals might facilitate the grieving process. This information would potentially be useful for a variety of professionals, including veterinarians and veterinary nurses, grief counselors, mental health workers (including general practitioners, psychologists, social workers, and nurses), and those working in the companion animal funeral industry. In this study we posed the question “What kinds of people use cremation services for their companion animals?” to the providers of that service in one Australian city. We then asked people who had recently had a companion animal cremated about their reflections on their decision and the process.

Method

Service providers: Participants were adults over 18 years, currently in employment associated with animal cremation and memorialization located in an Australian city of approximately one million inhabitants. Participants were recruited from commercial businesses listed in the telephone directory that specialized in companion animal cremations and memorial services. One of the authors contacted all five relevant businesses by telephone, explained the purpose of the research, and invited participation in the study. Three out of the five service providers who had direct involvement with animal cremation and memorialization agreed to take part. One provider refused to participate because of conflicting commercial interests; the other thought that he did not have anything of interest to contribute. Participants were interviewed in their workplaces.

Companion animal caretakers: A veterinarian agreed to assist with recruitment of participants by asking the staff in her surgery to identify people who had cremated a companion animal in the previous three months and to invite them to contact one of the researchers for an interview. At the time they were invited to make contact, potential participants were given an information letter outlining the purpose of the study. Surgery staff passed on details of the study to 20 people, and 6 accepted by contacting the interviewer. Only one person who was approached but who did not participate contacted the inter-
viewer to give a reason for this: she stated that it was “too [emotionally] hard.” One participant contacted via the surgery referred the researchers to a friend who had recently cremated her companion animal, who also agreed to participate. Data reached saturation at seven interviews, and therefore no further participants were sought. The final group of participants included six women and one man. They ranged in age from 40 to 78 years. All were Anglo-Celtic in origin, and all were residents of Australia. Five participants were interviewed at a university site, and two were interviewed over the telephone.

The University of Adelaide Human Research Ethics Committee approved both phases of the project, and participants gave written, informed consent.

The qualitative methodology used was framework analysis (Pope & Mays, 2006; Richie, Spencer, & O’Connor, 2005). This method permits predetermined questions taken from previous literature to be asked of participants, as well as allowing for the emergence of themes. Following the interviews, which were all audiotaped, transcriptions of the data were given to participants to check for accuracy. No discrepancies were reported. Transcripts were systematically analyzed by two researchers to locate themes. The thematic content was next labeled and checked within and across the interviews for each identified theme. Independently, the first author analyzed all the transcripts and located thematic content within and between interviews across both data sets, checking these analyses with those done by the other researcher to ensure consistency.

Interviews with service providers lasted from 37 to 69 minutes. Participants were asked the opening question, “What kinds of people use cremation services for their companion animals?” Minimal prompts were given so the participants could express anything that they thought was important during the interview. However, two direct prompts were given during all the interviews: (1) “Can you tell me what kinds of people use your service?” and (2) “Was there anything special about the pet that people want to have a cremation or memorial or headstone for?”

Interviews with people who had recently cremated a companion animal lasted from 15 minutes to 75 minutes. Participants were asked to respond to prompt questions about their companion animal and their feelings regarding the loss of the animal, why they decided upon cremation, how they found interactions with the staff involved in the process, and what they had already done or planned to do with the ashes. It should be noted that all the participants had used a cremation service with their veterinarian as an intermediary. That is, they did not have direct contact with the cremation service provider.
Results

In relation to the research question posed to service providers—“What kinds of people use cremation services for their companion animals?”—five main themes emerged from the data. These were: “Everyone uses companion animal cremation services”; “People who consider the companion animal as a family member, as a child”; “People who want memorials for their companion animals”; “Grieving people”; and “People who seek compassion and social support.” It should be noted that these themes are interrelated—for example, the theme of grieving relates to all the other themes. The data from companion animal caretakers reflected these same themes, apart from the first, as they were not in a position to know the types of people who might decide to cremate their animal.

“Everyone uses companion animal cremation services”

All three service providers agreed that there was no one category of people who sought cremation of their companion animal. They noted that all ages attended the service, both men and women, and families, couples, and singles. Elderly people were deemed the most frequent users of the services, but young men also used the service frequently. One provider said that he was inundated with demand. Although cats and particularly dogs were the most commonly cremated, examples of animals from fish to horses were given, with providers saying that they cremate all types of animals. Cremation was sought by people who had shared their life with the animal from years to only weeks, and by people whose companion animal had died of sudden or chronic illness, had been euthanized because of illness, or euthanized even though healthy (for example, due to marital separation).

One category of people who were reported to use the service was those facing practical challenges. These included having an animal who was too large for the people to manage after the animal had died (a large dog, for example); having had an animal killed in an accident, with the person too distressed to collect the remains (after a motor vehicle accident or drowning, for example); and a psychological inability to touch the dead animal. Other practical circumstances that came into play were laws forbidding burial at home in some council areas and people having nowhere to bury the animal (for people living in flats, units, courtyard homes, and other accommodations without a garden).

The pragmatic decision to cremate an animal because of its size or because of living arrangements was echoed in six of the seven interviews with companion animal caretakers: “He was too big for me to bury myself” (Participant 2).
“People who consider the companion animal as a family member, as a child”

The three providers considered that users of their service tended to have strong emotional bonds with their companion animal and treated their companion animal as a family member. They discussed love of the animal, a relationship with the animal, the animal giving meaning to the person’s life, and the animal as his or her whole life.

This theme was evident in all seven of the interviews with companion-animal caretakers: “My dogs are precious to me, I’m not married, I don’t have children or grandchildren” (Participant 3).

Service providers reported that some of their clients wished to be buried with their companion animals, just as people often request to be buried with their parents, partner, or children. Australian law does not permit the burial of human and animal remains together (Franklin, 1999), however, and thus people hoped that the ashes of their companion animal could be interred with them (by being slipped into their coffin by a sympathetic relative) or the ashes mingled and then scattered. One service provider recounted instances of people specifying in their will that their companion animal be euthanized and cremated for this purpose, should they predecease their companion animal.

Companion-animal caretakers in this study confirmed that one of the reasons they had decided to cremate was so that they could be buried with their animal—or, in some cases, multiple animals: “They’re both to be buried with me when I go” (Participant 7).

Caretakers also indicated that a primary motivation for cremation was so that the animal could “remain in the family” by remaining in proximity: “If we move or anything, we can take him with us” (Participant 5). One person stated: “The ashes help with the grieving process because they’re [the animal] not completely gone . . . I want to have them there with me, as they always have been” (Participant 3).

Caretakers flagged the importance of knowing for certain that the ashes they received were their animal’s remains and were willing to pay additional costs for the assurance that this was the case.

“People who want memorials for their companion animal”

The three providers discussed the need for people to have a memorial or ritual similar to that given to humans, and they all agreed that this helped their clients move through the grieving process. Memorials were defined by the providers as the ashes themselves, and also plaques, urns, a place in a memorial garden (offered by one provider) or a plaque on a wall (offered by the same provider). The providers indicated that people were willing to spend money,
from hundreds to thousands of dollars, with no expense spared by some caretakers, regardless of their age, gender, or socioeconomic status. Although acknowledging that the caretakers wanted to treat their animal’s remains as they would a human’s, none of the providers offered a funeral service, although two offered a quiet grieving room for the bereaved.

All the companion animal caretakers discussed the need for a memorial of some type, and all had engaged in some type of ritual involving the ashes. These included taking the cat’s urn to the animal’s favorite spots (Participant 1); opening a bottle of champagne with friends and scattering the cat’s ashes in the garden (Participant 2); dividing the dog’s ashes into two portions and scattering some (and keeping the others), with a wake following the scattering (Participant 3); keeping the urn of ashes in a family room with a photograph of the dog on top of the box (Participant 5); and keeping the ashes until interstate family could attend a ceremony where they could all grieve together, some months later (Participant 6).

The cost of cremation was mentioned by two of the caretakers, who indicated that, while “it’s not exactly cheap” (Participant 2), in relative terms it was cheaper than veterinarian bills, which, one participant noted, were in the thousands, following a long-term illness that her animal had suffered.

“Grieving people”

Although all people utilizing the service were grieving, the providers discussed numerous examples of people in extreme distress. They used the terms crying, upset, distraught, emotional, heartbroken, suicidal, overcome, not coping, unable to breathe, unable to speak, and requiring counseling or medication to deal with the death of their companion animal. One provider also discussed instances of people overwhelmed by multiple losses because the death of a companion animal had been compounded by the death of significant human others; these losses might have been both past and current.

All of the women companion animal caretakers indicated that they had experienced grief at the loss. The male participant was less expressive about his emotions. One participant was crying throughout the interview and indicated that after her animal was euthanized she suffered “amnesia,” ringing the veterinarian’s surgery later that day to report her dog missing: “It was one of those things when you just can’t possibly face the truth, so you block it out” (Participant 7). Another participant noted that the collection of the ashes evoked extreme grief: “I was really upset, really devastated, it took me ages to go and get him . . . a friend came with me as well . . . I had to take two days off work at the time, so it was really tough” (Participant 2).
“People who seek compassion and social support”

All three service providers acted in the capacity of grief counselor for people seeking cremation. The three providers saw this as an important role, since they believed that they were in a position to understand what their clients were going through, even though none had any formal qualifications in grief therapy. All considered that they provided guidance of a practical nature (removing remains and cremation of them, choice of urn, decisions about where to place the ashes), as well as an emotional nature. From the interviews it appeared that offering emotional support was a major function of their role. One provider recognized that access to a qualified grief counselor would have been desirable for clients, but all the providers thought that they had developed the necessary skills through experience. Providers gave examples of people returning to visit them after the cremation of their animal, up to several years later, as a way of expressing remembrance. Other bereaved caretakers returned with successive animals. It was clear from the interviews that continual exposure to death and grieving clients was a distressing aspect of working in the industry, and all three discussed the toll this took on their own lives.

The companion animal caretakers, as noted, all went through their veterinarian, who dealt with the cremation provider. A frequent theme, consistent with cremation providers’ observations, was the need for support and empathy. The veterinarians were praised for their ability to help the person through the process of euthanasia and the decision to cremate. One participant explained that the veterinarian “laid out” her dog, grooming him, covering him with a blanket, resting his head on a pillow, and playing soft music in a room where she could spend time alone with him before he was sent for cremation: “I’m so grateful to them for doing that... he looked lovely and at peace, and it meant such a lot to me” (Participant 3).

Discussion

In this study we asked three providers of cremation services for companion animals in one state in Australia to discuss the kinds of people who seek their assistance. Their accounts yield data on the general types of people who cremate their animals, their motivations for doing so, and the role the cremation and the service provider play in facilitating the grieving process for the bereaved. We triangulated the service providers’ data with data collected from interviews with seven people who had recently cremated their companion animal.

Five interrelated themes emerged from the data that answer the research question regarding who might cremate their companion animal: “Everyone
uses companion animal cremation services”; “People who consider the companion animal as a family member, as a child”; “People who want memorials for their companion animals”; “Grieving people”; and “People who seek compassion and social support.”

That people wanting a cremation do not fit one particular category is important. Podrazik et al. (2000), in a call for further research into the parallels between companion animal loss and human loss, argue that previous research in the area has tended to focus on children and the elderly. This study reinforces their suggestion that researchers should consider grief and loss in relation to companion animals across the human lifespan. Similarly, Morley and Fook (2005) stress the importance of acknowledging that the human-animal bond has value to a wide range of people across all age groups. Thus, grief at the death of a loved companion animal with whom a valued relationship has been shared should not be pathologized or marginalized by health care professionals and other service providers. This can be the case if it is seen to be the product of childhood (and thus childish) or an issue that concerns only the stereotypical lonely old person with no social supports save the cat. The matter of grief after the death of a companion animal, Morley and Fook state, is a significant social issue for mainstream society.

Memorials are a culturally important part of grieving and mourning rituals and comprise an aspect of symbolic acts (Podrazik et al., 2000). If people view their companion animal as their child, or a member of their family, it seems reasonable that they would want their family member treated with dignity and respect in death. The participants in this study all discussed the importance for the grieving process of the cremation, the ashes and the vessel in which they were stored, and the place where the ashes were kept. Memorials for companion animals are believed to provide comfort and facilitate closure for the bereaved, serving the same function that they have for humans (Clements, Benasutti, & Carmone, 2003). Of interest was the fact that none of the providers offered a funeral service, an important transformation ritual involving rites of separation that helps the mourner move from one social status to another (Podrazik et al., 2000; Hendry, 1999).

That funeral services were not offered provides a notable regional contrast between the United States, Europe, and Australia. Morales (1997), writing from the United States, indicates that there, unlike in Australia, animals can be buried with full religious ceremony and can even be buried with their caretakers. Howell (2002), writing from the United Kingdom, also underscores cultural differences, observing that “Pet cemeteries continue to proliferate in Europe and North America, [and] pet funerals provide both elaborate ritual and profitable business” (p. 20). In contrast, Brown (2006), writing from New
South Wales, in Australia, discusses the dearth of literature in Australia and elsewhere on ways in which theologians of all faiths can offer pastoral counseling and grief counseling and provide a funeral service for bereaved caretakers of companion animals. He attributes this to an underestimation of need by religious leaders, with a consequent absence of religious liturgies for companion animal funeral services, a point reiterated by Westerfield Tucker (2007). Gage and Holcomb (1991) note that rituals for the death of a companion animal have not been conventionalized and that service providers therefore need to help grieving caretakers formulate rituals that have meaning to them. It would seem that attending the cremation services offered by the providers in this study would be one way of achieving this. The companion animal caretakers in this study did not attend such services but instead formulated their own rites and rituals.

That people attending the cremation service were experiencing grief is not a surprising finding. The expression of grief after the death of a companion animal has been identified as a significant factor in promoting coping and functional status (Kaufman & Kaufman, 2006). However, the extent of the grief and the service providers’ recognition that some clients needed greater assistance than they could offer is of concern, as it is not clear that people did receive any further support. People experiencing multiple losses, or reminded of earlier losses, with the animal’s death constituting “symbolic loss” (Lagoni, Butler, & Hetts, 1994a), as identified by one provider, have been considered in the literature as particularly distressed (Margolies, 1999). Of concern too is the fact that the providers are dealing with people in great psychological distress without having had any training in how to manage this distress. The emotional burden placed upon them, of constantly dealing with distraught people and death, was apparent in their accounts.

The finding that people sought compassion and social support from the cremation service providers indicates that these providers serve a useful function, although, as we have already discussed, it is noteworthy that they provide this function without training. It may also indicate, though, that people are not receiving that compassion or social support from other, perhaps more appropriate, sources. Quackenbush (1984) has observed that there are no socially sanctioned cultural mechanisms in Western society for people to express grief over the death of a loved companion animal. Wrobel and Dye (2003) also point out that, even though the grief reaction one experiences upon the death of a companion animal is similar to that felt after the death of a significant human other, the mourning processes sanctioned by society are not the same. Without appropriate, socially sanctioned rituals, people must find their own ways of dealing with their grief.
Where there are restrictions placed upon the expression of grief, such as those resulting from the social denial that the human-animal bond is a significant relationship, the need for an expression of grief may in fact be intensified, causing the individual stress and further psychological suffering (Stewart, Thrush, & Paulus, 1989). Stewart et al. (1989) use the term “disenfranchised bereavement” to describe the result of the discouragement of grief and mourning rituals by the absence of social recognition and legitimation of the loss (p. 148).

There is a role, therefore, for the veterinarian in acknowledging the need for rites and rituals and in providing information about how and where these can be accessed. Toray (2004) suggests that cards, flowers, and lighted candles in the veterinary clinic can assist those dealing with the loss of their loved animal. Lagoni, Butler, and Hetts (1994b) consider in detail how veterinarians might acknowledge the loss and grief a person is experiencing, how to approach the return of companion animal remains, the role of the clergy and religious leaders, and the importance of memorials and funerals. The family doctor, the psychologist, and the social worker can play important roles in counseling the bereaved (Donohue, 2005) and in giving them permission to engage in rituals (Sharkin & Knox, 2003). There is very little concrete information available, however, about what these rituals might constitute or how the therapist can assist, nor are there any evaluative studies to demonstrate their efficacy. These are areas that need to be addressed. The present research has described some of the rituals in which bereaved caretakers engage; the systematic study of a larger sample and how these rituals assisted the grieving process would be valuable in future research.

There are several limitations to this research. The providers perceived that “everyone” uses their services, and while they could not define a specific category of person most likely to employ their services, it is not the case that cremation of companion animals is requested universally in Australia. People regularly bury their companion animals in the garden, flush their goldfish down the toilet, and dispose of dead animals in the rubbish. Although this study tells us something about the people who seek cremation of their companion animals, it does not allow prediction of who will and who will not want this service. It is possible that the theory of attachment may be instructive here (Field, Orsini, Gavish, & Packman, 2009; Podrazik et al., 2000). In future research, standardized measures of attachment to the companion animal, such as the Owner-Pet Relationship Scale (Winefield, Black, & Chur-Hansen, 2008), may demonstrate attachment to be a predictive variable. It would also be valuable to explore the views and experiences of health care professionals and religious leaders. Views from the wider commu-
nity about companion animal death and mourning rituals would also be informative.

While only three providers participated in this study, it should be understood that a total of five such providers was available to participate in the study. Such providers should themselves be the focus of future research, in order to better understand the important role they play, to consider the ways in which their work may impact their personal and professional lives, and to determine how assisting grieving companion caretakers might be best managed. This research is necessarily exploratory in nature. There are no quantitative data available regarding how many people cremate their companion animals, or any similar data on their demographic characteristics. There are no data on people’s awareness about cremations and their availability or their attitudes toward, and preferences for, human rites and rituals for companion animals. This information should be collected in future research so that modern Western society can more sensitively respond to bereaved caretakers of companion animals during their time of loss.

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