

The Myth of Humane Euthanasia

By definition, euthanasia means “the act of ending the life of an animal having a terminal illness or medical condition that causes suffering perceived as incompatible with an acceptable quality of life, as by lethal injection or certain medical treatments.”

“Euthanasia” is perceived to be a shelter’s last response to over-crowding or to end a “rescued” animal’s suffering. As a “humane” means to end an animal’s life, euthanasia is believed to be painless, ethical, and humane – but sadly, this is often not the case.

In shelters nationwide, animals are still put to death by heart-stick and by gas chamber “euthanasia” – methods that are terrifying, painful, and anything but humane.

An animal shelter worker in Ohio was found to be guilty in the heart-stick deaths of 11 dogs who were inhumanely put down at the Gallia County Animal Shelter in Ohio.

Why is heart-stick euthanasia such an inhumane way to end an animal’s life? Heart-stick involves a needle and syringe containing sodium pentobarbital being passed through the chest wall, through several layers of muscle, and finally penetrating the heart.

The sodium pentobarbital burns as it enters the system, and it often takes several sticks to “euthanize” an animal.

When a dog is taken to be killed, he or she is grabbed and dragged into the kill room and then held down by several staff members. Heart stick euthanasia is intended to have an injection directly into the heart, but if the dog struggles – as they often do – the needle misses and an injection often goes into the dog’s stomach.

This process is slow, brutal, and frequently used. How is this possibly “humane?”

Sadly, there is nothing remotely “humane” about how many kill shelters euthanize their animals.

Many methods of euthanasia are inhumane, including “Injections into the hearts of conscious animals...inhalants, decompression, drowning, electrocution, shooting, and other methods...[which] are unacceptable because they rarely provide an instant death and cause suffering before death occurs.”

Some drugs can “cause discomfort if injected too quickly or at too high a dose, and some, such as strychnine, can cause animals to experience violent convulsions, muscle contractions, or cardiac arrest.” Other drugs, such as nitrous oxide, halothane, and carbon monoxide gases, are cost-prohibitive and often less reliable – and they can cause irritation or excitability in animals during “euthanasia,” as well.

When carbon monoxide is administered to poison animals, they suffer unspeakably as they slowly suffocate to death. Shelter workers have reported that animals who are “euthanized” with CO2 often “scream and go into convulsions” as they struggle to draw a breath. As a result, this

practice has been outlawed in California, Maryland, Rhode Island, and Tennessee, but it is still widely used in shelters nationwide.

Decompression chambers are equally cruel: They simulate ascents to thousands of feet above sea level – and at rates up to 15 times faster than what is recommended. “At this speed, the gases in animals’ sinuses, middle ears, and intestines expand quickly, causing considerable discomfort or severe pain. Accidental recompression can occur when equipment malfunctions, when there is a personnel error, or when small animals become trapped in air pockets. They must then be put through the procedure all over again.”

The image of a shelter animal being quietly injected with a sedative that simply puts her to sleep is largely a myth – there is no quiet, peaceful death to alleviate pain and suffering; the death itself is painful and full of suffering. Shelter animals are often happy, healthy, vaccinated, spayed, neutered, and ready to find new families – but instead, they face gruesome heart stick, gas chamber, or decompression deaths.

On Feb. 14, 2015, there were 15 dogs who were on the euthanasia list in Brooklyn, New York. But on this day renowned for love, only one of the dogs was adopted off of that list. Nine cats were murdered that day, as well – and this is only representative of one shelter on one day. Thousands of other lives were also lost on this day.

Euthanasia is supposed to be performed by a veterinarian – and it’s intended to be completely painless and non-traumatic. It’s intended to be a death with dignity, to avoid pain and suffering.

Sadly, that’s not what’s happening – and perhaps more people would adopt shelter pets if they knew what really happened at kill shelters.