

# Bereavement: A Challenge for All

**H. Renee Chalmers Hoynck van Papendrecht**

*Executive Board Member, WSAVA*

In his January editorial, Dr. Colin Burrows wrote about the Cares of a Caring Profession. Dr. Burrows is right: we as veterinarians care a great deal about our patients and clients and tend to forget to take care of ourselves. We deal with very strong, raw emotions on the part of clients as well as the wellness and welfare of the animals under our care, and we are deeply touched by what we see all day. Ours is a wonderful profession but we do have our own emotions with which to cope and carry a tremendous responsibility.

We often are faced with taking their beloved pets from clients, leaving grieving owners behind—and try to console them the best we can. Meanwhile, we too have a strong bond with our patients, and it is a powerful act to take a life, even when it is warranted by unalleviated suffering. We should not forget that experience does not make this act easier and pay attention to our own distress. Talking about it with our staff members and colleagues can be very helpful.

## The Final Gift

Nevertheless, I think euthanasia is one of the most important and delicate services we provide—for both animals and clients. I feel very privileged to live in a country where I have all I need to sedate my patients properly and can give them a smooth, painless death, and in doing so give their owners a chance to say goodbye in a peaceful way.

Like most of my colleagues, I am always striving to make this process and the mourning more bearable. I have organized meetings with bereaved clients at my clinic. The idea was to learn from them what they would like me to do and how they wanted to be informed about the possibilities in the process of losing a beloved pet. A friend who is an artist does pottery, mixing ashes with clay to create urns or objects you can see or hold. One such object is a smooth stone that the owner can carry in his pocket to continue walking the beloved



**Renee Schoorl, the artist mentioned, with her dog Cezanne.**

*Photograph by Iris de Smit, the involved photographer.*

dog that is gone. A photographer, who took the wonderful pictures accompanying this editorial, also provides comfort through images of owners and their pets during or at the end of their lives. I discussed such options with owners at our meetings. Another individual, a counselor, offers assistance to people who have trouble dealing with a loss. We discussed all these options.

## Solace & Privacy

I also asked clients and give much thought to what people would like me to do to ease this final transition. For example, clients really appreciate my making house calls to end their pets' lives in the comfort of their safe and trusted homes. This consideration eliminates the stress for both animal and owner of coming to the clinic and allows me to talk with clients in privacy.



**A client working on a memorial urn.**

*Photograph by Iris de Smit.*

Our meetings were heartwarming, and people started these conversations from very different angles; nothing is more personal than mourning. Everyone respected one another and listened carefully. In the end they came very close to consensus about what they wanted the staff to do. By sharing this experience with you, I hope to encourage you to do this in your clinic. It will make you a better and happier veterinarian, and your clients will be grateful for the opportunity to be understood.