

# Planned Death Of A Pet Is Painless

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** The first article in this series of four told of the vast numbers of pets who wind up being "put to sleep" by a throw-away society. This, the second article, is a sobering descrip-

tion of the process. The writer is a homemaker, graduate student at Wayne State University and journalist intern for Observer Newspapers.

By **JOAN WEAVER**  
Special Writer

Those who deal daily with the problem of animal control agree that adults who think having a litter is cute, or a fine way to teach children about birth, should witness the end of the short life-cycle of animals for whom no homes can be found.

Let's take the litter of four kittens whose birth was described in the first article. The next six weeks hold enchantment for the gray, the two-tiger-striped and one pure white kittens. They open their eyes on schedule, tumble about the house with their mother, disappear in overstuffed chairs and sleep anywhere, all in a limp heap of multi-colored fur.

Of the four, the mathematical odds are that one will not have a new home.

In this litter it is the gray who must go to the animal shelter. We'll go, too.

The people who know it will die care for it tenderly in the time that is left. What happens now is called euthanasia. The word derives from the Greek "eu," meaning good, and "thanatos," meaning death. In this case it refers to the painless destruction of suffering animals.

It might be argued that the gray is not suffering. But without a home, the gray would suffer.

At the Michigan Humane Society Kindness Center in Westland, the people whose job it is to euthanize homeless, sick or injured animals don't speak easily or live lightly with this part of their job. Sometimes there are unspayed cats in the eyes of grown and hardened men.

The gray is placed gently on a stainless steel table. The man in the white coat shaves a patch of fur from the forehead of the gray and scrubs it carefully with alcohol in preparation for the concentrated injection of sodium pentobarbital.

It is the same procedure and the same drug that is used to anesthetize other animals for surgery, but now the procedure is for death, the dosage is lethal and the entire human system revolts. Thirty seconds after the injection is begun, the gray is unconscious. And as suddenly as there was life, now there is death, reflected in the still patch of gray fur and flesh and not yet fully formed bone.

This is the method used at Westland, when there is only one or perhaps two animals that must be put to sleep (PIS).

The other method here is called "high altitude euthanasia" and is used when many animals must be PIS, because it can accommodate seven or eight animals at a time, depending on their size. High altitude euthanasia takes place in a large iron chamber which duplicates the conditions of high altitude. The gauge reads from 0 - 30, indicating thousands of feet. When the gauge reaches 10, or 10,000 feet, hypoxia (which means an insufficient amount of oxygen) sets in. This is not to be confused with asphyxia in which there is a complete cut-off of oxygen.

There is no impairment of breathing in hypoxia, no distress, and the animal does

not feel that air is being denied him. There is a gradual lapse into unconsciousness and subsequent death.

It is comparable to being 40,000 feet up with no oxygen mask. The animals are unconscious within 30-60 seconds, dead within two to five minutes and remain in the chamber for 20 minutes.

The crematorium is about nine feet long, almost as high as the ceiling, and occupies most of the space in the clean, cement room. It is necessary for disposing of carcasses. That is what the gray is now, a carcass.

The crematorium gives off a humming noise and heat, signs of life. It burns 10 hours a day and has a capacity of 750 pounds of tissue. When it is finished, there is nothing left but ash.

The men who have to attend to all this suffer a public image as "henchmen," which is a convenient way that the public has for fielding its own unconscious guilt in such situations by placing

the blame on men who, because of default by the public, are stuck doing this job in the most humane way possible.

Of adoptable young animals which come to shelters, (adoptable meaning without fleas, ear-mites, those that are house-broken and have no apparent problems), it is estimated that 10-30 per cent are put to sleep simply for lack of homes.

And those animals that have some condition, however minor and treatable,

that might be transmitted to other animals, must be put to sleep immediately to prevent epidemics in the shelters.

People are so informed when they bring animals to the shelters. Altogether, two-thirds of the animals which go into the shelter will never come out again.

(Next: Is execution the only way to control an animal population that is increasing four times as fast as the human population?)

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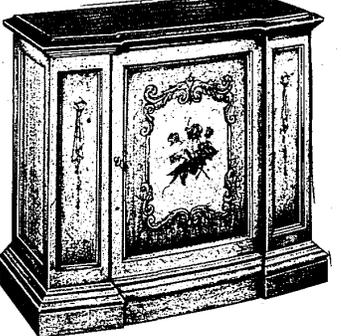
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