



OBJECTIVE: *To urge that intracardiac (IC) lethal injection (heart stick) be the euthanasia method of last resort for shelter animals, to be administered only after a sedative renders the animal unconscious.*

Introduction

Most shelters deal with the sad reality that staff will have to euthanize some of the animals who enter their facility. When there is no more room, when animals are sick or injured beyond rehabilitation, or when animals are not candidates for adoption because of behavioral issues that cannot be ameliorated, shelter workers are faced with the daunting task of taking the animals' lives.

There is only one humane way to euthanize a shelter animal, and that is with the intravenous administration of a euthanasia drug such as sodium pentobarbital, ideally, once the animal has been rendered unconscious by the administration of a sedation agent. However, some shelters in West Virginia are euthanizing animals by intracardiac injection (IC) without proper sedation or care.

The Federation of Humane Organizations of West Virginia (FOHO WV) opposes the use of IC injection unless the animal has been sedated,

Handling dangerous/ aggressive animals

Just what constitutes a dangerous/aggressive animal may be subject to interpretation given the circumstances the animal finds him/herself in.

Some animals are literally pussy cats in their own environment but can turn into raging tigers in the noisy, smelly, scary environment of a shelter.

Shelter workers need to protect themselves while handling the animals they come into contact with; and they also need to treat those animals humanely, especially at the time of their death. Every animal deserves a dignified death.

"A fractious or fearful animal may be physically restrained for intramuscular (IM) injection of a pre-euthanasia drug with a control pole, squeeze cage, restraint gate, feral cat box, or other remote device, injected safely, then released to a quiet, low-stress environment while the drug takes effect.

"This release period allows the animal to relax, with the sense that the human interaction is over; the next time the animal is touched by human hands, he will be unconscious....

"Once the animal has lost consciousness, the technician can safely handle the animal for injection of sodium pentobarbital without causing undue stress or discomfort."³

What is Intracardiac Injection?

Intracardiac injection (IC) involves forcing a needle through the layers of muscles into the chest wall to inject the euthanasia drug directly into the heart. "IC can be the most efficient method of administering sodium pentobarbital, particularly if:

(a) the animal's veins have been compromised because of illness or injury;

(b) the animal's circulatory system is too compromised to transport the drug from a vein to the brain; or

(c) sodium pentobarbital has already been administered to the animal through IV or IP injection but has not effectively resulted in death."¹

IC: Difficult to administer and can cause animal pain

Many euthanasia technicians are not trained in this procedure; and even if they are, they are not always successful on the first try. Meanwhile, if the animal is not completely unconscious, this form of euthanasia creates undue pain and trauma.

Since the injection of a euthanasia drug such as sodium pentobarbital directly into the heart of a conscious animal is excruciatingly painful, even if the technician is able to locate the heart chamber on the first attempt, "IC injection must never be administered to an animal unless the euthanasia technician has confirmed that the animal is fully unconscious."²

The humane way to euthanize shelter animals

The American Veterinary Medical Association's (AVMA) *Guidelines for the Euthanasia of Animals*, states "Intravenous injection...is the preferred method for euthanasia of dogs, cats, and other small companion animals."⁴

Euthanasia by intravenous or intracardiac injection to an unconscious animal does not pose a risk to shelter staff even if the Certified Animal Euthanasia Technician (CAET) administering the drug sticks him/herself with the needle. It would take a syringe much larger than the one used to euthanize even a large dog and it would have to be injected directly into a vein to affect a human. It would be completely unlikely for that to occur so the danger to humans is extremely slight.

Euthanasia by intravenous injection is the method recommended by every national humane organization and the National Animal Control Association.

FOHO WV considers the lethal intravenous injection of sodium pentobarbital or a similar euthanasia drug, administered by competent, trained personnel, to be the method of choice for humane euthanasia of dogs, cats, other small animals, and horses. In addition to proper training, there must be adequate funding for the shelter to purchase the appropriate euthanasia supplies.

Once all other avenues have been exhausted to find a companion animal a new home, then, and only then, should euthanasia by injection be administered. Every shelter animal who is not going to find a new home should be treated with dignity and guaranteed a painless death.

• Solution to Pet Overpopulation

The ultimate solution, of course, is to reduce the number of unwanted animals entering shelters across the state. **If we reduce the number of animals born, we reduce the number being euthanized.**

Therefore, we must:

- Promote spay/neuter as the only viable solution to reduce pet overpopulation in West Virginia.
- Eliminate puppy and kitten mills as a source of the overpopulation of dogs and cats.
- Educate the general public on how best to care for their animals so they are not relinquished at animal shelters.
- Educate the shelter community on more creative ways to advertise the animals they have for adoption, which will increase the number of animals leaving shelters for forever homes, which should be the goal of every animal shelter.
- Increase public awareness for shelters and animal control agencies through social media and on-site adoption centers in community pet stores that do not sell puppies and kittens and other venues to increase adoptions.

*Of the 55 counties in West Virginia, 26 report that 30 percent of the 40,000 animals in West Virginia shelters are euthanized.*⁵

Conclusion

FOHO opposes the intracardiac (IC) (also known as heart stick) method of euthanasia unless a sedative is administered prior to the heart stick rendering the animal completely unconscious and only under the conditions stated above. We must show humane care for all animals throughout their lives and especially at their last breath. However, until we get the population under control in every corner of the state, we will continue to euthanize animals as a means of animal control. And although we would like every death to be a "beautiful death," it can never be achieved. On the other hand, a compassionate death can: it takes adequate staff, regular training, good equipment, and proper drugs.

Endnotes

¹<https://www.animalsheltering.org/sites/default/files/content/euthanasia-reference-manual.pdf> p. 27

²Ibid. p. 26

³Ibid. p. 31

⁴<https://www.avma.org/KB/Policies/Documents/euthanasia.pdf> p. 43

⁵2017 West Virginia Veterinary Board Euthanasia Statistics