



# BMDCA Info Series

## Bernese Mountain Dogs and End-of-Life Care

2020 #19

**Introduction** ► It is an unfortunate reality that each of us will be required to make end-of-life decisions on behalf of the dogs that we cherish. These decisions will be based on our own knowledge and values, the expertise of our veterinarians, and the options for end-of-life care available to us. This is not an easy topic, but thinking about it before we find ourselves in a crisis allows for more thoughtful, sound decision-making about these matters.

This *Info Sheet* presents a wide range of options from early euthanasia before or with the onset of complicated symptoms to palliative care and pain management strategies. **These are a set of decisions for which there are no single right answers. The goal is to select a path from available options, including euthanasia, that makes sense for both you and your dog.** This material also identifies additional resources for those seeking to maximize choice in end-of-life care for their dogs. Most of us are familiar with the concept of hospice, which provides end-of-life care for those no longer seeking a cure for a terminal condition. There is a growing palliative care movement in this country, which potentially has much to teach us about end-of-life care for our animals.

**Defining Palliative Care** ► Palliative care is symptom control in the face of a life-threatening illness. It is about making informed choices, which require that we be fully knowledgeable about our choices. Palliative care can and should be delivered while curative care is underway, if that choice has been made.

Unfortunately, veterinarians are not always equipped with a palliative care team to help us make difficult decisions and manage our dog's symptoms. In human medicine, a good palliative care team consists of a variety of professionals who meet with the newly diagnosed patient and his/her loved ones to discuss and evaluate treatment options. The benefits and burdens are identified, and these are considered broadly—socially, spiritually, emotionally, and physically. There is no agenda except to ensure that the person living with a life-threatening illness is fully informed and supported in whatever decisions are best for him/her in the context of his/her life.

Symptoms, also broadly defined, are addressed through an interdisciplinary palliative care team, with support from specialists. This is quite a contrast to what is typically available to a dog and his/her owner. No matter how skilled and well intentioned a veterinarian is there is no substitute for the expertise of a full team approach.

Recognizing that we are not likely to have the array of services that could help us at the end of a dog's life, there are actions that we can take to help our dogs and ourselves when we arrive at the critical time. First, we can begin to consider the options for end-of-life care that we want available to our dogs.

Some of us will choose euthanasia and others will prefer to manage symptoms, allowing natural death—both can be loving options.

**Managing Symptoms At The End-Of-Life** ► How does one manage symptoms at the end of life? Is it even possible? Yes, it is. For humans, euthanasia is typically not a viable option, and so perhaps by necessity, symptom control has become very effective. In animals, where the end-of-life decision is often euthanasia, symptom control is far less advanced, and requires educated, proactive owners as well as committed veterinarians.

The reason for euthanasia of a sick animal may be our perceptions of the animal's pain and suffering, but there is a middle road between pain and death—management of that pain. The first line of pain management in dogs is typically NSAIDs (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs), but those are only the beginning of what is available to the owner committed to effective pain management. In human medicine there are pain management specialists/teams, because effective control of pain is a specialized skill. Therefore, it is no slight to our veterinarians when we require a pain management consultation with a veterinary professional who has that level of expertise.

**The Importance of Locating Resources in Advance** ► Anticipating and planning ahead will make a stressful time a little easier to handle. The first task that you are likely to face is finding the necessary expertise. How does one locate a pain specialist? One can ask a veterinarian for a referral, check with area veterinary specialty clinics, and/or explore the website of the International Veterinary Academy of Pain Management (<http://www.ivapm.org/>) to locate pain management specialists in your area. Because we do not have a palliative care team at our disposal, we must develop our own team, and that means we must seek information from a variety of professionals who can help us make difficult decisions before those decisions need to be made. For example, if a dog is diagnosed with cancer one can locate a pain management specialist and make an appointment even though the dog is undergoing chemotherapy and doing well (i.e., not in pain). The purpose of that appointment would be to gather information about the expected trajectory of pain for that disease and learn about the options for managing that pain. During that discussion the benefits and burdens of each option can be explored. Then, by carefully weighing this input and experience, the owner can make an informed choice on behalf of his/her dog when required.

Pain is not the only distressing symptom at the end of life. Loss of appetite is a normal part of the process of dying, and forcing nutrition and hydration can over burden a system that is shutting down. Again, the time to decide what to do when your

For more information, please visit our website at [www.bmdca.org](http://www.bmdca.org).

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dog stops eating is not the day the dog stops eating—it is now.

Other possible symptoms at the end-of-life include:

Discomfort/pain	Lethargy/weakness
Decrease/loss of appetite	Changes in mobility
Decreased interest in others	Changes in breathing
Changes in mood (i.e., depression)	Confusion
Difficulty swallowing	Loss of bowel control
Change / loss of consciousness	Weight loss

We should educate ourselves, talk with our veterinarians, and knowledgeable others (e.g., our dogs' breeders) about how we want to handle these symptoms.

In addition to mentally preparing ourselves for symptom management by gathering information, we should learn any skills that may be needed if we want to provide this kind of care at home. For example, we may need to learn to give injections or administer fluids, and these are skills best learned when one is not in crisis. We also will want to know what services will be available to us if we intend to provide home-based end-of-life care. For example, will our veterinarian and/or a technician make home visits? Will we have access to medical supplies? Another question we may wish to ask is what we will do with our dog's body if our dog passes at home. Thinking ahead is critical to achieving the goals we set for end-of-life care.

### Accessing BMDCA and Berner-Garde

**Resources** ► Staying abreast of Berner health issues and health care implications of research studies is an important part of being a responsible owner. Tapping into available information resources and networks could be critical to you and your veterinarian when making an informed choice for your Berner.

The BMDCA website ([www.bmdca.org](http://www.bmdca.org)) houses a wealth of BMD health information, which includes a link to current BMD research (<http://bmdca.org/health/studies.php>), health articles, BMD Health Studies, health links, vet vocabulary, and more. There is also a link to the BMDCA Health Committee should you wish to make contact to ask a question or seek assistance. For health clinics listings go to <https://www.ofa.org/health-clinics>

The Berner-Garde Foundation ("BGF") is another source of health information (<http://www.bernergarde.org/>). It was established in 1995 to collect, maintain, and disseminate information about genetic diseases observed in the Bernese Mountain Dog. Its online database, launched in 2004, contains information, which has been compiled over many years from **voluntary submissions** of data from owners, breeders, and other public sources of information, including the Orthopedic Foundation for Animals (OFA).

If your dog has been diagnosed with one of the illnesses being investigated or has a tumor, please participate in the current studies on BMDs. It is difficult, but only by your participation in these studies will we have hope of better treating and eliminating these diseases. Often participation in research studies can be done simply by providing data you already have or by providing simple lab tests performed or collected by your veterinarian. The information you share with researchers will enable them to offer breeders legitimate, scientifically-proven information about diseases, and to develop tools breeders can use to produce healthier dogs. Also, please inform your veterinarian about how to submit tissue to the BMD DNA & Tissue Repository. This information is on the BGF website at <http://bernergarde.org/Home/Repository.aspx>.

**Concluding Thoughts** ► A dog gets just one life—and one death—and, we are in control of both. Just as we prepare for that new puppy, so too should we prepare to gracefully and kindly walk our friend toward the end of their life. There is much we can do now before we find ourselves on that dark path to ensure that our wonderful dogs receive optimal care at the end of life. This is a challenging topic and a difficult one to think about but it is important and inevitable. The bottom line is that your dog deserves it, and by preparing in advance, it might help with the "I can't handle this" syndrome, which can be overwhelming. Do what is right for you, and in your informed opinion, for your dog. That includes a wide range of options discussed here and others that you may consider in your decision making process. Then select what will be the end-of-life goals for your dog that are best for your very personal and unique situation.

**Websites of Interest** ► The American Veterinary Medical Association has published Guidelines for Veterinary Hospice Care that can serve as a resource to owners opting for palliative care. (<https://www.avma.org/policies/veterinary-end-life-care>)

Portions of this *Info Sheet* are adapted with permission from Bowman, M. "Making Hard Decisions: Ensuring Choice and Optimal Care at the End of Life," *The Alpenhorn* (Veterans Issue), December 2010, pp 40-42.

**Excerpts from Sydney's Story:** "Osteosarcoma was really not on my radar when I took Sydney in to check out a subtle limp on her right rear leg... Like any cancer diagnosis, osteosarcoma presents many decision points at a time when your brain is stuck on, "Wait—what?! Cancer?!"... The balancing of Benefit and Burden guided all treatment decisions for Sydney... Let me say bluntly that cure is not really the goal. It is the hope, of course, but osteosarcoma is not a cancer that has a great long-term prognosis. We knew this, and we opted to amputate and do chemotherapy. Why? Because every one of us is terminal – that does not mean we want to die today. There is no shame in wanting more time with a dog or a person that we love... However, that desire for extra time needs to be balanced against the burden on the dog... Sydney lived about 15 months after her diagnosis and amputation. It was almost all high-quality time that involved things Sydney loved—walks, people, and donuts... Decisions were made thoughtfully in consultation with others and the professional literature, and always reflected a commitment to ensuring that the burden of care was never higher for Sydney than the benefits."

Excerpted with permission from Bowman, M. "Sydney's Story," *The Alpenhorn*, 2019 Fall Issue, pp 63-65.

