



Dr Emma Whiston – a special vet with a special purpose

Death and dying are undeniably a part of life, but how many of us could deal with it on a daily basis? Dr Emma Whiston is one of those rare people. She told Saskia Adams how and why she does it.

My family has had to say goodbye to no fewer than three beloved pets in the last year – two due to old age and one to illness. Other animal lovers will understand how traumatic the end of your pet's life can be for all involved. It is something we all dread.

Thus when I came across a website called 'My Best Friend Veterinary Home Euthanasia Services' I heaved a sigh of relief. Here was a vet who not only made home visits but who specialised in palliative end-of-life care and advising owners on the right time to say goodbye to their pet – something that can be very hard for the owners to objectively judge.

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When I first met Dr Emma I immediately knew my dog and I were in good hands. She carefully assessed my 14-year-old Akita, Mirri, and at a later date, when I was fully prepared and accepting of the need to say goodbye, she gave my beloved girl a peaceful and tranquil passing.

And yet this gentle and quietly spoken mother-of-two human children almost never became a vet – for more than one reason. 'Growing up, I always wanted to be an actor and go to NIDA!' she says. 'It wasn't until Year 10 that I decided to follow in my father's footsteps and become a vet.' Emma's dad had been a mixed-practice vet in rural England before emigrating to Australia with Emma's Scottish mother and her four siblings. 'He was very much a James Herriot sort of vet, so we always had a menagerie at home, and helped Dad with his work.'

However, perhaps surprisingly, Emma's parents weren't too keen on her pursuing the same profession as her father. 'I think they were concerned because it is a very sad job at times; and in Dad's days long hours for not much pay was the norm... I understand now why they tried to talk me out of it! It is a difficult profession to learn.' Also not encouraging was Emma's careers counsellor at school. 'She told me I wasn't smart enough to do the course. So I thought, I'll show you!'

Show her Emma certainly did, though she almost left the profession after her first year. 'I found that what I learnt at uni and what Dad had taught me were often poles apart. Uni was of course very scientific and textbook-based, whereas Dad had a great (and some would say older-fashioned) bedside manner. I believe he showed me the art of being a vet.'

General practice work was also an eye-opener. 'I had only ever experienced my dad's practice, and I found others were working in a more clinical way – at times it was hard to marry the two.'

Naturally, the clinic euthanasias Emma had to perform – at only 23 or 24 years of age – were sometimes quite distressing. 'Every time I had to do one I would put myself in the owners' shoes, I would suffer with them, feel their pain... I thought if I didn't do that I wasn't doing a good job. I soon got quite depressed and burnt out. If I was to continue, it was essential for me to learn a whole array of other skills to manage it better. As a result I can now perform euthanasias on a daily basis.'

A recent study in the *Australian Veterinary Journal* which found that vets are four times more likely to commit suicide compared to the general adult population didn't surprise Emma. Rural vets are apparently the most at risk, due to depression, isolation and long hours. 'We don't have peer support services or debriefing like ambos or

my best friend

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Above: Emma with her beloved Kelpie Sally,

doctors in hospitals do. There is no psychological support set up for shelter vets and staff either, who sometimes have to perform euthanasias all day every day.'

(One organisation has made a step in the right direction, however: Lort Smith Animal Hospital in 2006 became the first shelter in the world to employ a full-time chaplain to counsel both staff and clients – the Reverend Barbara Allen. Emma and Barbara met while doing a pet loss and bereavement course at the Australian Centre for Grief & Bereavement at Monash University: www.grief.org.au.)

During the next ten years, Emma had a couple of stints away from general practice work. She enrolled to train as an actor in the National Theatre Drama School in St Kilda and, after the birth of her daughter, Abby, worked at Werribee Open Range Zoo for a year. 'I got my heavy vehicle

Dr Emma Whiston cont.

licence and became a safari bus driver! Just to do something really different.'

But it wasn't until 2004 that Emma found her true calling: she established Australia's first dedicated veterinary home euthanasia service – My Best Friend. 'I knew I didn't want to do general practice work in a clinic again. And My Best Friend was a concept I'd been contemplating for some years, and I liked the idea of being able to provide peaceful euthanasias for pets at home. Putting pets to sleep in a clinic environment can be traumatic and stressful for the vet as well as everyone else.'

To minimise distress, Emma has carefully developed her technique over the years. She uses sedation drugs to first calm the pet so that by the time comes to find a vein, the animal is sleeping peacefully in their owner's arms. A cup of tea is always welcome and helps to create a more relaxed atmosphere.

Meaghan Adams, another client of Emma's, says, 'Her method takes about 45 minutes, at the owner's pace, which provides plenty of time to say goodbye and gives you complete control. You are never rushed. Emma is wonderful – and very understanding of your tears.'

Another area of clinic work that Emma is articulate about is the current trend towards pets having chemotherapy and very invasive surgery: 'I think it sometimes goes too far. You have to weigh up what the pet is going to go through with the quality of life to be achieved... I believe pet owners should be counselled better about their options so that they can see euthanasia as a treatment option instead of a failure or a cop-out.'

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Many clients often ask about the lovely kelpie pictured with Emma on her website and brochures. 'My Best Friend's name, logo and colours were all inspired by my old best friend Danny, a red-and-tan kelpie who died 2 years ago,' she explains. 'When I first saw her, I fell in love instantly – a client had rescued her from a farm where she was going to be

shot. She used to come to work with me – we were together all the time.' But that's not Danny in the photo with Emma. 'Funnily enough, she didn't like having her photo taken; she was camera shy.' Pictured with Emma, rather, is Sally, who she adopted from Save-A-Dog a few months before Danny died. 'I didn't intend to get another dog at all... A client asked me to view a dog she was thinking of adopting on their website, and there I spied Sally. Again, it was love at first sight.'

And was Danny jealous of the new dog in Emma's life? 'Not at all. Danny showed Sally the ropes in those last few months of her life. It was almost as though Danny organised it all to make sure I was in "good paws" before she died. She really approved of Sally.' Sally now goes to work with Emma most days, as long as it isn't too hot in the car.

My parting question to Emma is perhaps an obvious one: Is it still difficult to deal with sick and dying pets every day? 'It's a challenge, but I receive really good feedback from my clients so I know I'm on the right track. I'm really proud of what I do; I've found my life work, and I'm at peace with it.'

