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Establishing ‘quality of life’ parameters using behavioural guidelines for humane euthanasia of captive non-human primates

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Abstract

Chronic pain and distress are universally accepted conditions that may adversely affect an animal's quality of life (QOL) and lead to the humane euthanasia of an animal. At most research institutions and zoological parks in the USA, a veterinarian, who has physically examined the animal and reviewed the clinical records, ultimately decides when an animal has reached a humane endpoint. To aid in the difficult process of interpreting pain and distress, we have developed specific behavioural guidelines, in addition to standard clinical information, to help define unique characteristics and traits of primates to assess and promote discussion of an individual primate's QOL, and thereby, to assist in the decision-making process regarding euthanasia. These guidelines advocate the creation of a QOL team when the animal is diagnosed with a life-threatening or debilitating chronic condition, or at the time the animal is entered into a terminal study. The team compiles a list of characteristics unique to that individual animal by utilising a questionnaire and a behavioural ethogram. This list enables the team to quantitatively assess any deviations from the established normal behavioural repertoire of that individual. Concurrently, the QOL team determines the number of behavioural deviations that are needed to trigger an immediate discussion of the necessity for humane euthanasia of the animal. The team remains intact once created, and revisits the animal's condition as frequently as deemed necessary. This process improves animal welfare by continuing the quest to optimally define QOL for captive primates, and potentially for all captive animals.

Keywords: animal welfare, behavioural assessment, captive management, euthanasia, non-human primates, quality of life