

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF JACKIE CAMPBELL

PALLIATIVE CARE VET

This month, *A Day in the Life* heads to Queensland, where veterinarian Jackie Campbell owns and runs a growing business, Sunset Vets, which works exclusively with veterinary patients requiring palliative care and euthanasia services. While Campbell and her head office team are based on the Sunshine Coast, Sunset Vets also offers end of life care in Melbourne, Canberra, Sydney, Brisbane and the Gold Coast. She was kind enough to find time in her busy schedule to chat with *The Veterinarian* about what constitutes a typical day for her. Campbell is an early riser, who begins her day at around 5:00am. "I'm lucky enough to live in a pretty beautiful part of the Sunshine Coast, so a good day starts with a really quick swim or a jog if I can squeeze it in, but I don't always manage it," she said. She then trawls through emails over breakfast and is generally in the office by 8:00am to assist the care team. "At Sunset, we support a large team of vets who provide this special type of care right across the country," Campbell said. "As one of the first companies to really try and dedicate all we do to palliative care, it's been an interesting journey."

Following her graduation from the University of Queensland's vet program in 2006, Campbell became interested in understanding and treating patients with chronic pain early in her career. "I dabbled in rehab and sports medicine with some courses through the Canine Rehabilitation Institute and have also done some basic training in acupuncture as a modality," she said. In 2014, she travelled to the UK to complete her Diploma of Canine Myofunctional Therapy and followed this in 2016 with training in the US where she became the first Australian veterinarian to obtain certification in Animal Hospice and Palliative Care through the International Association for Animal Hospice and Palliative Care (IAAHPC). With the aim of providing more supportive and better directed palliative care in Australia, Campbell started Sunset Vets in 2014. Since then, she and her team have delivered professional and personalised services to clients whose pets are approaching the end of their lives while also offering a valuable and much-needed alternative to veterinarians wishing to refer end of life cases on.

The nature of Campbell's work tends to involve seeing patients towards the latter part of the day and into the evening, which allows her time in the morning to work with her head office staff. She also uses this time to support any new vets joining Sunset Vets, discuss cases with vets on the road or with referring practices, and to prepare for lectures or other commitments she may have. When she begins her consulting hours at around 10:00am or 11:00am, many of these are conducted in clients' homes. "This means a drive to see the client, which I actually love—it gives me an opportunity to catch up on phone calls, or just absorb the scenery and listen to music," Campbell said. "On a busy day our team will see four to five clients per day, and we allow about an hour in the home for each consultation, depending on what support they need."

Palliative care cases often require quite a lot of preparation, particularly as Campbell must work through all the referral notes and previous case histories for the pet. She then combines this knowledge with information collated by the Sunset Vets care team, who have tried to gain an understanding of all the relevant factors affecting both the patient and the client. "We take into account things like why the client is seeking support, what we can do to help them understand their pet's prognosis, and what fears and concerns we need to address to ensure the best outcome for the patient," she said. "Palliative care work in general is not that different from routine veterinary care, but we do focus really specifically on comfort-focused outcomes and

spend much more time talking with owners about their goals for care, their limits, and their caregiver burden."

Campbell is quick to point out that in a couple of crucial ways, palliative care also differs quite significantly from regular veterinary practice. "Patientwise, it's all about pain and symptom control, so we're often fairly aggressive in our treatment plans, and I'm much braver with what I'll recommend in the palliative setting than what I would otherwise do in primary care," she said. "In many ways, however, it's also a type of slower paced medicine: we create the environment where we have fewer time constraints than in clinic life, which allows for more planning. In this way we hope we can avoid crisis points for our palliative patients."

take when a patient is suffering with poor quality of life, but the owner is not ready to say goodbye? Or, how is it best to manage tricky cases where owners have religious objections to euthanasia? "These questions are definitely challenging," she said. "But it's also kind of fun to be at the forefront of the challenge, making incremental improvements to our standards of care."

Given her willingness to identify and tackle challenges in her chosen field, it is unsurprising that Campbell also finds many aspects of her work rewarding. "Getting on top of a patient's pain and seeing that transition happen – that will always feel great," she said. "Equally, providing euthanasia for a pet who needed it can



Do you currently have any pets?

I am actually currently pet-less and it's definitely not a natural state of being. I grew up with dogs, cats and horses so it's unusual to be without an animal in the home, having recently lived my own palliative care journey with a much-loved cat. My cat's story was the very stereotypical vet story – a stray in the clinic I worked at, she became my very first cat spey when I was a vet student (thanks to my epic boss Stephen Lindores for letting me scrub in, picking up the surgical pieces, and then letting me take her home when no one else would). She moved with me through vet school, across the country through all my vet jobs and survived to a respectable 21 years of age, teaching me so much about palliative case management in her final years. Personality wise, this cat was also intent on ensuring she was an 'only child' her whole life. I remember multiple attempts at introducing other clinic strays, and she would not have a bar of it, so she ruled the house right till the end.

What is your favourite animal?

Can anyone seriously answer this question?! I'm not sure I have a favourite. As a kid I was gifted an 'adopted' rhino from my parents who recognised my animal loving gene early. They paid a contribution to an African conservancy for many years on my behalf and I've loved rhinos ever since, maybe I am happy to settle on that as an answer. That said, it's pretty hard to overlook so many of our incredible Australian native wildlife species as favourites.

If you could transform into any animal, what would you be and why?

Well, with the quality of life of our cats and dogs here in Australia, I feel like life would be pretty comfortable being either of those things. If we're going for something more exotic, though, I'd definitely be something that lived in an alpine environment. Give me mountains and snowy vistas! Perhaps I'd be a snow leopard?

If you or any of your colleagues would like to access more information about Sunset Vets, particularly if you would like to know more about supporting your patients, training and education for clinics, or accessing their free grief program for your clients, please get in touch at www.sunsetvets.com.au.

Also, if you are interested in connecting with other vets and would like to learn more about palliative care, you can find the Australian Veterinary Palliative Care Advisory Council website at www.avpcac.com – it is free for veterinarians to join.

■ JAI HUMEL



Euthanasia home visits also constitute a large portion of Campbell's case load. Pet owners who access end-of-life services have often had them recommended by Sunset Vets' referrer clinics, or they are clients who know they would prefer to be in their home rather than a clinical setting to bid farewell to their beloved pet. "The stakes are pretty high with these sorts of visits," Campbell said. "Again, there is lots of prep work ahead of the visits, and we work closely with the cremation teams at the end of the appointment to ensure the pet and family are all well looked after. We are such a relationship focused business."

Campbell is up front about the toll both palliative and end of life care can take on a veterinarian, and identifies the emotional weight of the work as being one of the most challenging aspects of her role. She recognises that vets have been involved with palliative care for generations but is equally cognisant of what she describes as "an evolving expectation of care" from pet owners. Consequently, Campbell is committed to pushing some of the accepted boundaries as she does her best to support the welfare needs of pets at end stages. "As a profession, I think we need to be constantly curious and learning about how we can do better," she said. "We are so often faced with ethical challenges in end-of-life cases, but we have very few accepted frameworks for how we approach these case decisions. As I reflect on how far we have advanced our diagnostics and treatment options, it's in contrast to how we've developed our palliative care skills – I believe there's a bit of a gap."

Veterinarians, in Campbell's opinion, need to have an industry-wide conversation about end-of-life care, answering the sorts of questions she comes up against in everyday practice. For example, what is the best course of action to

also be rewarding. There's a feeling that you're absolutely alleviating pain or distress, and that the day has therefore been a good one."

As the Sunset Vets team has expanded,

Campbell has also found a sense of satisfaction in helping her team. "I've realised that a lot of my joy these days comes not just from helping our clients, but from helping other vets to find their own love of this work," she said. "Our vets come from all kinds of backgrounds and career stages, and I know some of them would have left the profession had they not found this style of practice, so it's pretty rewarding to see them flourish and reconnect with the joy of vetting through joining the Sunset team."

While Campbell aims to finish her work tasks by 6:00pm and loves to have an evening jog if she has not managed to exercise that morning, she has a range of other commitments that help her balance the potential emotional toll of her day. She is involved in the Pets in the Park program, having founded the Brisbane chapter of the group, which delivers preventative health care to the pets of people experiencing homelessness. She is also the Australian representative for the IAAHPC, and is involved on several of their committees, including the education committee. To top it off, in 2017 Campbell founded the Australian Veterinary Palliative Care Advisory Council (AVPCAC) to promote the advancement of palliative veterinary medicine in Australia, and has also launched the Sunset Grief program, which provides access to free counselling sessions for people experiencing grief resulting from pet loss.

Sadly, Campbell herself is recently bereaved, so as we conclude this Day in the Life column with our usual Creature Questions, we take the opportunity to extend our sincere condolences to Jackie upon the passing of her own beloved cat Jemima.