Depth of grief over pet's death as severe as losing a relative, doctor says

By NICHOLAS READ

The suffering of a person who loses a pet can be as profound as that of a person who loses a family member.

That is what Dr. David Kuhl learned in preparing a lecture on the parallels between losing a pet and losing a loved-one for the 26th annual congress of the World Small Animal Veterinary Association in Vancouver this week.

Kuhl, a physician, works in the palliative care unit of St. Paul's Hospital and teaches counselling psychology in the department of family practice at the University of B.C. He was invited to speak to the congress about what veterinarians need to consider when dealing with a pet owner who is about to lose his or her animal.

"The way vets inform owners of the illness of their pets can add to their suffering," he said Thursday. "They have to consider what the pet is to the person. That pet may have been through an engagement, a wedding and then, five years later, through the grief and pain of a divorce. The pet can be the perfect companion. It can be anything we want it to be."

That's why, he says, evidence he has gathered in researching the subject leads him to believe that for some people, losing a pet is even more difficult than losing a person. Veterinarians told him that some pet owners will spend any amount to keep an animal alive, and most of those people feel more strongly about their pets than any human being in their lives. Consequently, when that pet's life is at an end, the pet's owner has to be treated as sensitively and compassionately as if he or she were losing a family member.

"It's more complex than people might think," Kuhl says of the bond between people and pets. "It's more complex than I thought it might be, but only because I didn't give it much thought before researching my lecture."

Now he realizes how profound that bond is, and how important the jobs of veterinarians are when it comes not just to dealing with an animal's illness, but with the feelings of the pet's owner.

He says the way veterinarians give pet owners bad news can be as important as the news itself.

"Much of the pain we experience is from the way physicians speak to us. It can be greater than the disease itself."

Kuhl says many of the themes associated with the death of a person are similar to those surrounding the death of an animal.

They include the so-called "life review" that occurs when a person is told he has a terminal illness.

"When people know they're dying, they will review their lives. When they find their pets are dying, they often will review their pets' lives and the significance those lives had to them."

Pets provide intimacy, companionship, and even a sense of spirituality, Kuhl says, so veterinarians must never minimize the feelings owners have for them.

"If we're careful how we speak and we're aware of the many psychological issues around dying, we can make a difficult journey less painful."