

Brendan Shumway  
Feature Story

### No easy choices with terminal pet sickness

Planning for death is certainly not an easy subject, especially when it comes to loved ones. Many communicate death wishes through advanced directives, such as do-not-resuscitate orders and living wills. But it is an especially sensitive subject of whether humans should assist in the death of an animal.

Karen Gilbert is the owner of an 11-year-old Sheltie named Mac. Gilbert has been with Mac since he was a puppy, and the two know the ins-and-outs of each other's daily routines. She calls Mac her shadow, and claims his only responsibility is to follow her around.

A little over four years ago Mac developed a cataract in his left eye. Even though he is now blind in that eye, the spread of his condition was slow and had very little effect on his way of life. More recently, Mac developed a cataract in his right eye. In less than five months it has become over 50 percent occluded. Gilbert is now faced with the reality that in a matter of months, her companion could be completely blind.

"For now, his quality of life is good," she said. "He knows his way around the house and usually doesn't walk into things."

But Gilbert admits that as sight leaves Mac, his life quality will likely diminish. She points to experiences like giving treats, which Mac does not notice in front of his own face unless her hand movement is dramatic. He doesn't always see far enough to move out from underfoot. And on long walks he can no longer be on a retractable leash, after having walked into a car tire and stair railing in separate incidents.

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“He knows something is wrong. I think he wants us to remove the cloth from over his eyes,” she said,” but there isn’t anything to remove. His smelling sense doesn’t seem to be kicking in, and it’s hard because we can’t explain to him what’s happening.”

Gilbert has looked into surgery to fix the cataracts. Beyond the prohibitive cost of animal cataract surgery, Mac is a poor candidate for the surgery due to the progressiveness of his condition and his breed.

“He still has a tease in him,” she said. “He manages to find the cat and succeeds in annoying her. But what is the limit when I’ll have to take him in? Is it when he loses weight and won’t eat? Is it when he can’t see at all?”

As difficult a decision it is to make, Gilbert knows the point will come when the decision must be made. Just two years ago, she and her family had to make the same decision with their other dog, which had bladder cancer.

“I woke up one morning and she was just so uncomfortable. She wouldn’t eat or move,” Gilbert said. “I knew she was ready and was signaling me.”

For now, she plays with Mac as usual and tries to direct him when he needs help, while keeping a close watch over his movements and quickly progressing condition. He still loves to catch a ball, but Gilbert tosses between the knowledge she will have to put him down, and at what point it will happen.

“I know that Mac will reach the point when we have to make that decision,” she said. “I just hope he lets me know when he’s ready.”

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