

Special feature

It's a sad fact, but not all pet crematoria are reputable.

Will you really receive your own pet's ashes back from the crematorium and will the service you get be the one you think you're paying for? **Hannah Graham** investigates...

Behind closed doors

Recently I found myself standing in the veterinary surgery having 'that' conversation with the vet. Our 15-year-old collie cross had suffered a stroke the day before and had deteriorated overnight. My dad, whom he lives with, was about to jet off to warmer climes for three weeks, so we needed answers pretty quickly.

The vet was excellent, and explained that our dog's health would go one of two ways. Not wanting our pet to suffer in any way, we spoke about euthanasia as an option and what would happen to his body after that.

Thankfully our dog made a good recovery. However, it wasn't until I started researching this article that I realised we need to be sure

that we receive the after-death service we believe we are getting. It's easy to forget to ask essential questions at an emotional time, so I was thankful that this article had put me in a better place to make an informed decision. I hope it does the same for you.

FOUL PLAY

If you'd asked me what an individual pet cremation comprised prior to looking into this topic, I would have said it was the same as a human cremation – totally on its own. When you enquire of your vet or read the company literature and are given the option between a mass or individual cremation, most of us would believe the two are pretty self-explanatory. I'm sorry to say that we – and many vets – are

simply oblivious to the reality.

Trading Standards will be investigating cases where pet owners believe the ashes they have received back are not those of their animals. In many such cases, it is only by chance that an owner will suspect foul play.

Recently in the press was the sad story of four deceased dogs whose bodies were found dumped in a field in Derbyshire after they were sent via their vets to be cremated. One of the owners actually received fake ashes back from the crematorium before the body was found. The case continues.

Kevin Spurgeon, of the Association of Private Pet Cemeteries & Crematoria (APPCC) and partner at Dignity Pet Crematorium in Hampshire, reveals: "A case I know of that

"If the remains are no longer on the tray they will either crumble into another tray or onto the ground between trays where they can become mixed."

illustrates the problem is that of a lady who had her gerbil cremated by a member of the APPCC. She previously had another gerbil cremated by a non-member who had returned about 10 times the quantity of ash. Naturally, she wanted to know why. Enquiries at the non-member produced the explanation that there was a

When a much-loved pet dies, it's important to ask certain questions.



Special feature

large amount of hearth with the ashes.

"However, laboratory analysis of the remains revealed the presence of bone fragments from larger animals. In other words, the remains of the gerbil may have been there but there were other animal remains too. This is not what she wanted or paid for.

"I had another person come forward recently who had received a fraction of her

horse's ashes back after an 'individual' cremation. She only smelt a rat when her other friend's casket was five times the size of hers (that horse was cremated elsewhere). At present I am aware of another horse owner who fully intends on taking private legal action against her vet for sending her beloved horse off to a horse slaughterer/transporter who subsequently returned a very small casket containing ashes which were not those of her

horse. It appears that he sent her horse to a disposal plant, then acquired some ashes from somewhere to give to the owner.

"The owner had specifically requested an individual cremation, yet her vet had entrusted her horse to someone that was more a 'carrier' than a crematorium, even though he could have referred her to several proper equine crematoria in the local area!

"A Trading Standards investigation is currently ongoing and the owner will have to wait until it is completed before taking her own action.

"I have also been told by one owner how she was paid an undisclosed sum of money by one company to prevent her from speaking out against it. She was made to sign a confidentiality agreement in exchange for the money."

VOLUNTARY STANDARDS

How can it be that this type of misservice is going on? Both disposal companies handling dead pets and genuine pet cemeteries and crematoria are currently regulated as waste sites; there is no legislation governing the way a cremation is carried out in the way there is for people, so any efforts to govern standards in the industry are purely voluntary.

Currently members of the APPCC are the only group to adhere to a code of practice. In the Association's words, this allows it to operate as 'genuine pet bereavement facilities – setting standards for pet cemeteries and crematoria that protect the pet owner and ensure their pet is handled the way they expect'. The code of practice in full can be found at www.appcc.org.uk or tel. 01252 844478.

CREMATION

One of the various ways you can dispose of your pet's body is via cremation, and many vets offer this service through a contracted company. If you wish your pet to be cremated there are usually two options: individual – with or without the ashes returned – or communal.

You may assume, as I did, that individual cremation means just that: your pet's body will be

on its own in the cremator and the ashes you receive back will be his and only his. However, this is not necessarily the case. Individual pet cremation can be quite different from what we expect. One type is as you'd imagine it – where one pet is placed into a cremator and cremated on its own. After cremation, the remains are left in skeletal form, the chamber is cleared, and the bones are collected and passed through a cremulator, which basically grinds them up into the ashes you receive. The ashes returned to you will be those of your pet as there will be no other bodies in the chamber. Any metal plates previously inserted during surgery should also be returned to you.

Tray cremation

Another type of cremation, also termed 'individual', actually involves more than one animal at a time in a cremator. Here, a pet's body will be placed onto an individual tray and put into a chamber along with several other bodies, also on individual trays, and the same process happens. Some crematoria do not use trays at all.

This type of cremation also

Case study

Strange & suspicious

Sally Taylor was shocked when her vet refused to tell her which cremation service they used. Going it alone, she found out that not all crematoria are as they seem...

"Mindy was always a go-getting cat able to fend for herself – even at the tender age of 23. One day, however, she came home after disappearing for three weeks (not unusual for her) and was very ill.

"Over the following year, after many tests, it was still unclear what the problem was. One day we went to the vet expecting some pain-relieving drugs and the vet suggested euthanasia which was a bit of a shock at the time. The vet clearly thought this was the right avenue to take and I felt pressured to make this choice. She gave us some information on our options, including cremation.

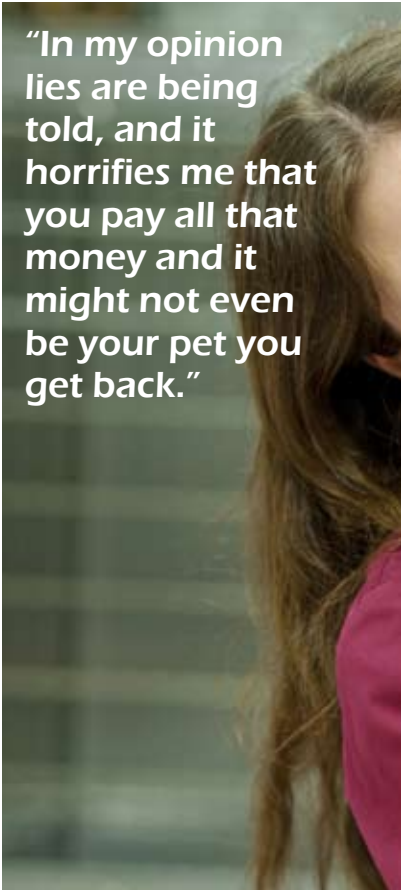
"Two days later I spoke with the vet again about our after-death options; however, she wouldn't tell me which company the practice used for cremations. It was important to me that Mindy had an individual cremation – just her on her own so we were guaranteed back her ashes only when the time eventually came – but when I asked about any guarantee on individual cremation she went very quiet. I was stunned that I couldn't get any information about the company at all.

"So I started to research pet cremation services and found out that, in some cases,

what is sold as an 'individual' cremation is in fact pets on individually numbered trays which all go into the chamber together. You are not guaranteed your own pet's ashes back at the end of the day.

"I called one large crematorium and the person I spoke to refused to tell me the number of trays they used in these types of cremations. I pushed further and said that I would want to view my pet's cremation to ensure it was individual in the way I regarded it. They said the cameras were currently off that afternoon, yet I hadn't even said that I wanted to go then. It all sounded rather odd and suspicious.

"Thankfully, after more Internet searching, I came across a pet cremation service I was happy with, which provided answers to all my questions and whose staff were honest about their services. They offered an individual cremation service of just one animal and you can watch if you wish. Mindy took a turn for the worse and my husband took her to the vet to be put to sleep. When we eventually took our beloved cat's body to our chosen crematorium, the care and compassionate, honest service made the whole experience easier."



"In my opinion lies are being told, and it horrifies me that you pay all that money and it might not even be your pet you get back."

Did you know?

Kevin Spurgeon comments: "The term 'individual cremation' is well understood within the pet bereavement industry but it is a term that is largely abused. Many pet crematoria will try to avoid being pinned down to the term individual by using other descriptions such as 'return of ashes service', 'cremation on numbered trays' or even 'special' or 'private' cremation. If you see this you should suspect that the pets are being cremated together."

provides individual ashes – but will you really receive back your own pet's ashes, or will they be mixed with other animals' remains? If trays are not used then it's highly likely they will mix; however, even when separate trays are used, there is still a risk.

"Cremation is a highly volatile process," explains Kevin Spurgeon. "I've seen bodies move about in the chamber because of this, so remains can mix. When an animal dies, its body will usually be stored in a freezer at the vets until the cremation company collect it. During this time a body, especially of a large dog such as a German Shepherd Dog (GSD), may be in a folded position, depending on how it's

handled, to fit it into the freezer. It will possibly be compressed by other bodies piled on top of it and even veterinary waste during travelling [some cremation companies offer clinical waste disposal along with cremation].

"A body will usually enter a crematorium still frozen on a high-grade stainless steel tray with 2-3in high sides. Whether or not it fits into the tray can influence the mixing of remains. As the cremation begins and the body is introduced to the high-temperature chamber, it will thaw out and the muscles will relax from their folded position and the body will uncurl. If the body doesn't fit the tray, it will not then be contained within it when this happens.

"The high heat decalcifies the bones and they lose their strength and will crumble. If the remains are no longer on the tray they will either crumble into another tray or onto the ground between trays where

Your options

When your pet dies, there are other options available apart from cremation. Here's a quick guide:

● **Landfill** – the body or the ashes must be consigned to a licensed landfill site. Currently premises that receive, handle, use, treat or destroy animal by-products must be approved under the ABPR and Environmental Permitting – a list of approved animal by-product premises can be found at www.defra.gov.uk/foodfarm/byproducts/approvals/index.htm – or contact your local authorities. Your vet may also offer a disposal service for a fee.

● **Home burial** – the family garden is the traditional resting place for many family pets.

Current legislation allows pets to be buried either in the property where they last lived or in a licensed pet cemetery. In heavy soil there should be at least 2ft of soil on top of the burial; 3ft in a light, sandy soil.

There is a range of coffins available – such as eco-friendly ones made from

cardboard, willow, jute and bamboo. If you do not use a solid coffin, cover the grave with some paving stones to stop any wild animals digging down.

● **Burial in a pet cemetery** – this can range from a formal burial plot to a 'green' burial where trees are planted on the grave. All cemeteries are different so do visit the site to see if it appeals to you. It will usually provide the location and the practical side of the burial, leaving you free to carry out your own ceremony.

Ask if the cemetery is permanent: a number have closed in the last few years due to the uncertainty with changes in legislation. It is advisable to ask what would happen to your pet's grave should this occur.

In a formal cemetery there is usually a maintenance fee which is either a one-off payment or an annual fee – ask questions if there is nothing in place. Cemeteries have their own regulations on marking graves too, so just check that they match your requirements.



Vets strive to do the best for pets and owners, but never be afraid to ask questions about the services they offer.

they can become mixed."

There are other factors to consider too: the air from the blower can gently blow remains about the chamber and a company may stop a cremation mid-session to remove smaller pets' remains while larger ones stay in to complete the process – this can also disrupt the bodies.

Kevin explains that not all crematoria conducting individual cremations in this manner admit to it – perhaps safe in the knowledge that no pet carer will question how 'individual' the cremation of their pet will be. Those who do ask to see the cremation of their pet may, in some cases, even be discouraged from doing so.

Mass cremation

Another option is communal (mass) cremation. Here, your pet will be cremated with other animals. Several pet

crematoria say that some or a token amount of the ashes from communal cremations are put in a garden of remembrance – or equivalent – at the crematorium.

However, Kevin warns that owners need to be vigilant here too: "Sometimes the site is not even licensed to inter/scatter communal ashes or they use the terminology to distract from the fact that the majority of the remains are transported to a landfill site for disposal.

"Although to some pet owners this is very distressing, it's the truth and it's what they are paying for. Glossing up these services does nothing but mask the reality of the situation and allows unscrupulous operators to twist words to serve their own ends."

ASH FOR CASH?

Many owners will be unaware of the different cremation services offered, and not all

Special feature

crematoria will provide the details in their literature. Surely, though, when you go through your vet for such a service, they will provide all the information you need to make an informed decision? Possibly not.

While we were talking to the vet about our dog, my father explained that he would want an individual cremation for him so we'd get his ashes back and nothing else. The vet assured us that the crematorium they used

offered this service, and reassured us that we would receive our dog's ashes back in a scatter tube or a box – whichever we preferred.

However, after speaking directly to the crematorium, I discovered that its individual cremations are performed on separate trays; so many pets will still be in together.

I couldn't see this information anywhere in its literature. Did the vet know? Had she just reassured me of a service she really knew nothing about?

It seemed the vet had made the same assumption I did

initially. I contacted the vet surgery and asked in more detail what the individual service comprised; they admitted they didn't know and had to call the crematorium to find out. They said they'd never been asked the question before and that they'd been using the crematorium's services for some time.

Kevin says: "What you experienced is a prime example of where vets go wrong. Our business [pet cremation] has grown from nothing into a complex range of services over the past 30 years and many vets just don't know what they are selling and are abusing the trust – often unknowingly – of their customer. I find it disgraceful. How many pet owners are reassured in the same way by their vet on a daily basis?"

"I also think there are situations where vets fear a

price increase if they question a company, especially if they use it for their clinical waste too and get a package deal.

Our association [the APPCC] feels there is a need for the veterinary associations to now step forward and produce clear guidelines for the selling of pet cremation services to prevent more owners being misled a cremation by their vet. Hopefully this will educate the veterinary profession and encourage more vets to offer the services of small specialist pet crematoria instead of just large disposal firms."

Pet owner Sally Taylor (see her case study on page 10) believes she was misled by her veterinary surgery and crematoria regarding what comprised individual cremation. She said her vet actually refused to name which crematorium service they used, and when she asked for a guarantee that her pet's ashes would be hers alone they didn't give an answer.

She says: "I am shocked and disgusted that some cremation services out there are mis-selling their services and I wonder whether vets realise this is going on when they communicate their clients' options to them. What is sold as an individual cremation may end up in owners receiving ashes that are not altogether their pets.

"In my opinion lies are being told, and it horrifies me that you pay all that money and it might not even be your pet you get back. People are entitled to the truth; then they are informed to make a choice based on the truth."

PRICE CHECK

You may receive cheaper rates if you go to a crematorium direct rather than via your vet. So do your research and compare costs so you can make an informed decision. In some cases a vet may pay a cost price to the pet crematorium and make a profit from selling it on to the customer. In my experience, however, my vet was actually cheaper than going direct, so it's not always the case.

Be prepared and know your after-death options in advance of your dog's passing.



Ensure you ask your vet about the cremation service they offer.



Pic: Dean Golja/Digital Vision/Thinkstock

Regulations

Pet cemeteries and crematoria are regulated through Animal By-Products Regulations (ABPR), (a European Union (EU) regulation) enforced by the State Veterinary Service and Trading Standards, and Environmental Permitting (England and Wales), which is enforced by the Environment Agency. Waste Management Licensing, which Environmental Permitting replaced, still applies in Northern Ireland and Scotland and is enforced by the equivalent bodies.

For many, going through a local vet will be more convenient and less stressful than arranging a cremation yourself. Be aware that if you contact the crematorium your vet uses for prices, it may well refer you back to your vet for a quote. You are, however, entitled to know the price of a service if you'd prefer to take your pet to the crematorium personally. And, if you do some research, you may be surprised to find a small, specialised pet cemetery or crematorium closer to home than the company your vet uses.

Costs will vary from company to company depending on the services provided, the weight of your dog, whether you want the body collected and the ashes returned and so forth.

Based on a medium-sized collie-type dog, one crematorium I spoke to charged £190.75 for individual cremation (on trays), with the

ashes returned, if you take your dog yourself and come back for the ashes another day. It was £20 extra if you want to collect them the same day. To attend a service and watch the cremation (via a camera you see your pet's body put on the tray for cremation) this costs an extra £58.75.

Some crematoria offer bespoke services where your deceased pet will be picked up directly from your home, cremated and the ashes returned back to you. Over a three-day period this cost £265.75 (the price is based on where you live in relation to the crematorium).

Via my vet, using the same crematorium, it would cost £145 for an individual cremation with the ashes returned in a scatter tube. Another vet, using a different crematorium, quoted an individual cremation with the ashes returned in

approximately 10 days (in a wooden casket with a brass nameplate) at £256.24

For individual cremation, where the body is the only one in the chamber, the prices I found quoted were similar – in some cases less – than crematoria offering individual cremation on trays. One charged £120 for a 15-30kg dog (typical weight range of a collie), including a choice of container for the ashes. Collection/delivery from home or vets was extra. Another charged £130 with extra for collection, and urns and caskets ranging from £20-£45.

WHEN THE TIME COMES

The information in this article is not given in order to tar all crematoria with the same brush; the service provided by many will be first-class – but it's the assumptions that are made

Need support?

● The Pet Bereavement Support Service (PBSS) is run by the Blue Cross in conjunction with SCAS (the Society for Companion Animal Studies). It offers support and understanding to bereaved pet owners – tel. 0800 096 6606 or email: pbssmail@bluecross.org.uk

You can also download its *Time to say goodbye* bereavement factsheet from www.allaboutpets.org.uk



The *Time to say goodbye* leaflet is available to download.

and what happens behind-the-scenes that matters.

If a vet is fully aware of what crematoria services comprise, then, as you can imagine, it may be hard for them to tell an owner asking what happens to their pet. However, we have a right to know the truth.

My advice is to be prepared. Ask all the questions in advance, so you needn't be bothered with such decisions at the time of your dog's death – and don't feel like you have to go with the company your vet offers. Then take comfort in the knowledge that you're receiving the service you want for your pal. ●

Many thanks to Kevin Spurgeon and Stephen Mayles for their help with this article. Any prices quoted are approximate and correct at time of going to press.