

Research your crematorium so you know how your dog's final journey will be dealt with.

A dignified end

Following a scandalous crime committed by a crematorium owner, **Kelly Felstead** investigates how dog owners can ensure their pet's send-off is in safe hands.

When the owner of a Derbyshire pet crematorium was jailed for fraud in February, after falsely claiming she had cremated and returned the ashes of pets whose bodies were subsequently found dumped in a field, many people wondered how this dreadful crime had been allowed to happen.

Pet cremation is currently completely unregulated. Licensing only applies to animal disposal, leaving the handling of a pet, the way a cremation is carried out, and the way ashes are collected, down to the individual crematorium.

What can people learn from this tragic case, and how can grieving owners be better protected when choosing their pet's final send-off?

Kevin Spurgeon, a director of the Association of Private Pet Cemeteries and Crematoria (APPCC), whose members adhere to a strict code of practice, said the case could act as a wake-up call for many veterinary practices to ensure the pet crematoria they used were fully licensed, and to sell cremation

services to their clients accurately.

"One positive outcome would be if both veterinary practices and pet crematoria were held more accountable for the way they describe the services on offer," Kevin explained.

"This case highlights that although different crematoria might seem very suitable on the face of things, this might not be the case behind the scenes.

"What it also does is remind these companies that, hopefully, they will be scrutinised more by the public."

Different ideas

Kevin said he was astounded at the lack of knowledge some veterinary practices had about crematoria companies, and highlighted the importance of checking and inspecting the crematoria they recommended to owners.

Association vice-chairman Stephen Mayles explained: "Many veterinary practices still believe all pet crematoria are the same and happily sell their clients



reassured them that there were some genuinely caring and professional crematoria businesses out there.

"People need to be on their guard — not to distrust everyone but to ask the right questions," he added.

"If it's an individual cremation people need to ask exactly how their pet will be handled and cremated, and check if he'll be the only pet in the chamber. If they get the reply that the pet will be on a special numbered or unique tray that should ring alarm bells, as it means he might not be the only pet in the chamber."

Vet Joe Inglis, who reported on the Derbyshire scam and the subject of pet cremation in a recent BBC 'Inside Out' East Midlands documentary, explained his reaction to the crime.

"I was absolutely disgusted by what happened, and shocked that anyone could treat pets and recently bereaved owners with such callous disregard," he said. "It also worried me that this might not have been a one-off and could just be the tip of a much more widespread problem."

Reliability and credibility

"To owners, I would advise asking their vet about the specific cremation services the practice uses and for confirmation that these have been inspected and are up to the very best standards. For vets, I would urge all practices to send someone to visit whichever cremation services the practice uses. This kind of hands-on inspection is the only way we can make sure that scandals like this never happen again."

A spokesman for Derbyshire County Council's trading standards team said people were entitled to seek reassurances from their vet that

they had made checks to ensure the reliability and credibility of third parties providing a pet cremation service. "Consumers are advised when seeking to purchase any goods or services to shop around before making a decision," he said. "Seeking members of relevant trade associations or schemes such as the Derbyshire Trusted Trader

"It's not a level playing field at the moment; 'individual cremation' can mean a number of things."

Scheme should help to restore consumer confidence in this sector."

Angela Moore, whose Labrador Sam was one of the pets involved in the Derbyshire case, has appealed to her MP to bring the current problems with pet cremation to Parliament.

She's campaigning with other owners for changes so fewer people can get into the pet cremation industry, and to ensure all services are checked by various agencies on a six-monthly basis.

"There are too many loopholes, too much that goes wrong, and not enough checks made by agencies such as Defra, trading standards, and veterinary practices," Angela said. "Vets need to ensure that the services they're selling are bona fide."

Angela, from Ilkeston, Derbyshire, said she had learned a great deal from the experience, including the fact that owners had to be prepared to do their homework on services.

Harvey Locke, president of the British Veterinary Association, said it supported good practice in all areas of veterinary practice. "The case in Derbyshire has highlighted that it's worth veterinary practices taking the time to find out about the services they use to better inform clients," he explained.

"We recently reminded all our members to check out the cremation service they use and particularly what happens to the ashes of pets that are cremated communally."

The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons confirmed it had received a letter from the APPCC with suggestions for providing guidance for the profession.

"At this stage, from our perspective, the key requirements will be for vets to ensure providers of after-death care services are appropriately authorised, and that they give appropriate information to clients about services they sell on behalf of providers," said an RCVS spokesman.

cremation services from the one that gives the surgery the best deal. They don't necessarily investigate the procedures at the crematorium, and even if they do their ideas might be very different from those of their clients."

Last November the APPCC launched a voluntary veterinary membership scheme, which gives people a simple definition breakdown of after-death care services.

"If all pet crematoria offered the same services and described them the same way it would be a lot easier, but they don't," Kevin continued. "It's not a level playing field at the moment; 'individual cremation' can mean a number of things."

Kevin encouraged owners to take a more active role in arranging their pet's cremation by directly contacting the pet crematorium. He



PIC: PVI Funeral Services, Hazywell

There are now more after-death care options for pet owners than ever before.

Useful contacts

- Learn about the APPCC's veterinary membership scheme at www.petcremationcodeforvets.org
- For further information on the APPCC visit www.appcc.org.uk