

# Merck Award for Creativity Recognizes Pet Loss Support Hotline Mentor

**B**onnie Mader, MS, and the Pet Loss Support Hotline she helped to create received the 1997 Merck AgVet Award for creativity in teaching veterinary medicine.

The hotline, a first-of-its-kind service and educational experience that allows veterinary students to earn academic credit, is in its eighth year. It was the model for six other pet loss support hotlines now established at veterinary schools in the United States. Nine other U.S. schools and veterinary schools in Australia, Canada, Japan, Scotland and Switzerland are consulting with

Ms. Mader, the hotline's coordinator and driving force, about developing similar programs of their own. Ms. Mader, a trained marriage-family-child therapist, conducts mandatory hotline training and biweekly discussion rounds for the students and is available to them at all times for consultation.

Students receive instruction through real-life experience in order to be able to deliver confident, compassionate care as veterinarians. They learn how to deal sensitively with clients whose pets have been euthanized, died from natural

causes or been lost through separation, and to manage their own emotions when involved with the sadness of others. They explore the wide range of implications concerning the human-animal bond, and get valuable insight when talking to disappointed or even angry clients about how they would like their veterinarians to treat them.

The program has had a marked effect on the profession's sensitivity to pet loss, has defined a new and important area of training for veterinarians and has provided a national public service.

## Hotline Volunteers Acknowledge Grief, Sadness and, Sometimes, Anger

**F**or Jennifer Sergeeff, staffing the UC Davis Pet Loss Support Hotline means both serving as an active listener—giving callers an opportunity to express their feelings—and working to become an effective communicator.

“Some estimates,” says Ms. Sergeeff, a third-year veterinary student, “project that we as veterinarians, besides doing surgery or medicine, will spend up to 50 percent of our time talking—to our clients, our staff and our colleagues. The hotline is preparing me with personal skills and psychological tools to serve my future clients. Dealing with death or euthanasia decisions and communicating at such an emotional time is an art that we need to develop.”

Ms. Sergeeff, who has been a hotline volunteer for two years, sometimes receives calls from clients who have unanswered questions and may be angry with their veterinarian for not having told them everything they want or need to know. She says, “I usually suggest they contact their veterinarian and either ask questions over the phone, or better yet, make a consultation appointment and discuss their questions and feelings in person.”

More often, the calls are based on sadness or grief. One woman called when her dog, after many years together, died. “After telling me about how she raised her dog and activities they enjoyed,” says Ms. Sergeeff, “she unfolded the history of her dog's illness, and then

she began to cry. She said her family, friends and veterinarian were being wonderful, but her husband was worried that she was grieving a little too excessively. It's a huge part of our job on the hotline to impart that there is no ‘right’ way to grieve and no magic time line that works for everyone.

“We discussed the stages of grief—shock, denial, anger, guilt, depression, acceptance—as well as how she was feeling. We discussed ideas on how she could memorialize her dog, and she liked the idea of making a memory book with pictures and stories to remind her of her beloved companion.

She thanked me for being there to listen and expressed her respect for my chosen career.

“Not every call ends on such an upbeat note, but we're not there to ‘make it all better’—there's no way we can. We serve as listeners and soundboards for callers, and if someone, by the end of the call, feels better, that's great. We give people an opportunity to express their feelings and are able to tell them that what they are going through is normal; that maybe tomorrow or the next day they won't feel quite so grief-stricken. That's what makes it worthwhile for me.”

**Bonnie Mader (right) and Jennifer Sergeeff review one of the informational pages that are available to each caller along with a personal letter from the hotline volunteer.**



**Right: Jennifer Sergeeff listens to a grieving pet owner.**



*The Pet Loss Support Hotline can be reached at (530) 752-4200 (V/TDD) from 6:30 to 9:30 p.m. PST, Monday through Friday. Callers telephone at their own expense, but there are no additional charges. For more information, or to order a supply of free Pet Loss Support Hotline brochures, call (530) 752-3602.*