

0:00:04.3 Katie Berlin: Hi, welcome back to Central Line. I'm your host, Dr. Katie Berlin, and we have a guest today that I have had on my list to hopefully get on this podcast since the very first day we had it up. Dr. Mary Gardner, welcome to Central Line.

0:00:18.7 Mary Gardner: Thank you, I'm excited to be here.

0:00:21.5 Katie Berlin: And Dr. Mary is here because... Well, she's here because she's awesome, but the timing of it is happening because we have our senior care guidelines coming out here at AAHA in January. So right after the New Year. And Mary, you were on the task force?

0:00:39.6 Mary Gardner: I was, it was really cool to be a part of that. It's such a passion of mine, the senior pets. And so when they asked me, I was like, yes.

[laughter]

0:00:47.6 Katie Berlin: Yeah, well, we were very honored to have you as a part of that process and definitely are really excited for these guidelines to come out, so lots more to come on that. But before we get going, in case there is a person listening who doesn't know who you are, would you mind just giving us a little bit of background about who you are and what you do?

0:01:05.3 Mary Gardner: A lot of people don't know who I am. I am a companion animal veterinarian, but exclusively does end-of-life care hospice, and so I'm co-founder of a company called Lap of Love, and we have veterinarians all across the United States helping families with end-of-life care. So it's been since 2010 that I've dedicated my life to the weak and the wobbly, the skinny and the stinky, and the families that love them.

0:01:34.1 Katie Berlin: I love that, and I have had personal experience with Lap of Love coming to my house to help me say goodbye to my old lady Kitty earlier this year, and they were just... I mean, you guys are just fantastic.

0:01:46.9 Mary Gardner: I'm so glad to hear that we could help you 'cause it's no place better than at home.

0:01:52.4 Katie Berlin: Yeah, absolutely. And before I forget, I also have my co-host here today, Franklin, who looks a little out of it as usual, and he is in chihuahua years, 900 years old.

0:02:06.4 Mary Gardner: Love it.

0:02:07.4 Katie Berlin: But he has 100 more to go, I'm hoping.

0:02:09.3 Mary Gardner: Totally.

0:02:10.4 Katie Berlin: So one day, 100 years from now, I'm sure that's the way that we'll go to. He's the love of my life.

0:02:17.2 Mary Gardner: That's awesome.

0:02:19.0 Katie Berlin: That's one reason why I'm so excited about today's topic because seniors

are my absolute favorite. Every time there's a post on Facebook or Instagram, The Grey Muzzle, I'm like...

[vocalization]

0:02:31.9 Katie Berlin: And then I have to share it. And there's just nothing that touches the heart like a senior pet.

0:02:38.3 Mary Gardner: Totally. I couldn't agree more.

0:02:40.4 Katie Berlin: I know there's no one that gets that more than you do. So before we jump in, I have one personal question to ask you, because you have been involved in Lap of Love, you speak a lot on the veterinary speaking circuit, I've heard you on a lot of podcasts, but what is one thing that people would not guess about you, Dr. Mary?

0:03:01.2 Mary Gardner: Okay. Oh gosh. So I think one thing just maybe more recently, if somebody hasn't met me in person, because I do a lot of virtual lectures, especially since the pandemic, we've all been turned into virtual, so when they see me in person for the first time, they don't ever realize how big I am.

0:03:17.6 Katie Berlin: You are actually tall.

0:03:20.9 Mary Gardner: Right, I'm 6'1. So I know it's very exciting but I hear that all the time like, "Oh, I never realized how tall you were." In videos world, you just don't get spatial awareness, so I think that's the big thing is people never expect me to be this big. [laughter]

0:03:36.0 Katie Berlin: You are very tall and I am not tall at all, and so I tend to think that everybody is close to my height, and... So when you meet people virtually, do you think that they're all tall until you meet them, or you're just used to being tall?

0:03:50.8 Mary Gardner: I think I'm just used to being tall and everybody's on average, and it's just better because in the past they would just, "Oh, how's the weather up there?" Or...

0:04:00.8 Katie Berlin: That's the first time I've heard that.

0:04:00.9 Mary Gardner: "How tall are you?" But now it's just like, "I never thought you were that tall."

0:04:07.9 Katie Berlin: Now you're used to it.

0:04:08.0 Mary Gardner: Now I'm used to it. Yeah, not that's super exciting. So that was pretty benign but a true thing.

0:04:13.4 Katie Berlin: That is a really very specific phenomenon at this point in time, because I had a whole job with Clinician's Brief, I loved that job and I never met that team in person the whole time that I was working there. And so I had no idea how tall my boss was, or what kind of shoes she wore.

0:04:30.9 Mary Gardner: Well, flats for me because I'm already up there. But we just had our holiday party for Lap of Love, and we've barely met some of our vets and some of our vets flew in for it, and our care coordinators, and all of them were like, "Oh... " 'Cause they see me not only on videos, but we have a lot of training, in our training protocols and in the videos, you can't tell how tall I am either. And everyone's like, "It's amazing." It's definitely helpful in concerts.

0:04:57.3 Katie Berlin: But not for the person behind you.

0:04:58.6 Mary Gardner: Not for the person behind. No. And getting stuff off the top shelf.

0:05:03.9 Katie Berlin: Yeah. And I would imagine in home, euthanasia, you have to lift a fair bit.

0:05:10.0 Mary Gardner: It's, actually physics is in my favor, and I can lift. I'm pretty strong, so I can lift a 150-pound dog. One half of it. But the thing with me is when you're going downstairs with a pet on a stretcher, the tall person should always be on the down side. 'Cause if you're on the upside, then it just...

0:05:30.0 Katie Berlin: It's a good tip.

0:05:33.6 Mary Gardner: Sliding happens.

0:05:34.7 Katie Berlin: Yeah, it's a good tip. Stuff you don't think about when you think about that process. Yeah, okay. Well, so now we know you're tall, and we know you love The Grey Muzzles and Creaky Kitties, and that is why we're here. So why are you so excited about these Senior Care Guidelines? What guides you when you think about what you do for a living?

0:05:56.5 Mary Gardner: Oh my gosh. What I think is the most impactful for me with what I do is everybody thinks I'm so sad, Katie. So they say, "You and your veterinarians, you euthanize three pets a day, doesn't that get on your emotional toll?" Yes, we cry. I get sad with the families for sure, but what really makes me sad is that so many families have not been to their veterinarian in years before they say goodbye, and it's nearly 50% of families have not... And that's not Lap of Love, that's all across the country. I looked at almost a million pets that were euthanized and almost half have not been to their doctor a year before they pass, and so I think we could do so much to get them into the clinic and when they are into the clinic, care for them the way they need to with such individualized care, and so these guidelines is a great start and foundation to build a better Senior Program.

0:06:50.9 Katie Berlin: Yeah, love that. And one of the things I love the most about these guidelines, which everybody who's listening and watching will have access to them by the time this comes out, and they're not your stereotypical list of recommendations, they really look holistically at how to treat senior pets better, how to make your practice more inviting to senior pets and their families. And as I'm listening to you, you said people think you're so sad, and I feel like there's a joy that you bring to the posts that you make about what you do to the energy of Lap of Love, that just really celebrates who these pets are and what their stories are that they have with their family.

0:07:41.6 Mary Gardner: Yes. Thank you.

0:07:42.9 Katie Berlin: 'Cause every senior pet comes with a story, right?

0:07:43.6 Mary Gardner: With massive stories, hundreds of stories because they've been with us for so long, and they're just such an integral part to a family, they've been through divorces, births, bankruptcies, depression, happiness, so many things, and they're just... I just absolutely adore them, the families and the stories that they bring, and so when I go help a family say goodbye, I'm there for an hour. We're just chatting. It's beautiful.

0:08:13.4 Katie Berlin: Yeah. I can totally see how that would change the whole process, not just for the family, but for the vet team also, because thinking about it in practice, the saddest part of euthanasias, for me, when I think about it now, or the hardest part, I should say, 'cause it's always hard just to watch people say goodbye to somebody they love so much, but it's having to switch tracks so quickly. It's that you have this appointment in one room where they're saying goodbye to a pet that's been with them for 14 years or whatever, and watch their kids grow up. And then in the next room, you have to go in and convince somebody to run a fecal or play with a puppy, which is lovely in the circle of life.

0:08:56.3 Katie Berlin: And you love puppy appointments, but it's so hard to switch that toggle switch in your brain. And part of that, I think, is because I wanna know more about that story, I want to sit there and listen to them. And that's one thing I love when you guys came to my house, is just sitting and talking about my sassy old lady cat who would, just assume, punch most people, look at them. And I just loved her so much. So this story, whether you're in a building seeing 20 appointments a day, or going to people's houses and doing three euthanasias a day, how can we use that story telling more in our care for the senior pets? How can we leverage that and make it a beautiful part of the process?

0:09:44.7 Mary Gardner: Yeah. Well, I think what's helpful is using stories for future pet owners too, because so many think that they're alone, they're on an island, they might have other family or friends telling them, "Well, it's just a dog or it's just a cat," and they don't know why they're getting so upset. And so before we even ever have to say goodbye, sharing stories of other family members that have gone through similar things, whether it's having an incontinent cat, an old incontinent cat, or a mobility dog, or something like that, or how do you help children get kind of ready for the passing. So I think stories of other people, not just myself, 'cause I don't wanna ever just, "Well, this is what happened to my Doberman."

0:10:27.2 Mary Gardner: And having that on the website and content and things like that, so when people are searching and just digesting all the information that they're gonna be getting to see what others have gone through and bring a smile to their face, seeing old pictures and videos and things like that. And I wrote two books this year, and so many stories of the families I've helped are just intertwined in them because they can be very impactful to another family going through the same thing, but I think it's helpful also to hear the family stories, so that way it isn't just another number. It isn't number three for the day. When I go into a home, it doesn't... I've gone in a six a day, and it's not just number six, it is completely new. I reset. This is the only thing that that family is going through that day. Right?

0:11:16.4 Mary Gardner: So, it might be six for me and I might have just been in an hour of traffic, but that's the most important appointment they'll have, and so I wanna be able to just to sit and listen. It's also important to enjoy the silence too, and be okay in the silence. And I think a lot of us freak out when we're in an emotionally tense moment that we want to always talk, and I think if

the family is ready to share, I'm totally open to it. But if they also wanna be quiet, that's okay, too. But in a clinic, you've had years of their stories, which is great, and I think it's so nice to say, "Hey, you know what, every time Noreen came in, I loved it, because he would always give me big kisses on my face when I was trying to clip his nails." And so for me as a pet owner, I heard that about my pet, that the technician remembered something small, like that my pet is a part of their memory. That would make me feel so good.

0:12:11.6 Katie Berlin: Yeah, absolutely. And we're talking about euthanasia because obviously Lap of Love, I would assume that most of the appointments that you see are for our end-of-life, but we're also thinking about all of that time that leads up to that day when you're caring for a senior pet, and for those of us who work in clinics, it is a real privilege to be able to build those relationships. Stories come into that even during, taking that time to get to know how those pets live at home with their people.

0:12:46.1 Mary Gardner: Yes. And that's a huge thing, and we talk a lot about this in the guidelines, just it needs to be individualized care and what the family can handle because what is gold standard in medicine, it's not just linear, it's not just about medicine. It's about care and caregiving and caregiver burden and what they can manage in the house and how their house is set up. It's 90% environment and emotions, and 10% is the medicine, and if we just hyper-focus on the medicine, we're gonna miss a big part of that caring process.

0:13:20.9 Katie Berlin: Yeah, that's a great point, that taking the time to listen to those stories, even if it's busy, even if you have another appointment waiting, giving them that space to sort of tell you what their life is like, will really help you know what recommendations are gonna stick and which ones are just not appropriate.

0:13:42.2 Mary Gardner: No, you can't suggest rehab. If they can't manage and they've got other things that they've got going on. Or I always say you have to ask them, "What's important to you about your care? And what's important to you about... Or what's the two biggest struggles that you have?" 'Cause us as vets, we may be thinking of these two problems, it might be incontinence and the horrible teeth that the pet has, but if they say, "Every night my cat is howling at 2 o'clock because of cognitive dysfunction," and it's just...

[vocalization]

0:14:15.1 Mary Gardner: At 2 o'clock, you better try to help that before you try to fix the other things that it's not on their list of priorities. So I think that's really important is to find out what their priorities are, because when you're caring for a senior pet, it is so different.

0:14:28.3 Katie Berlin: Yeah. Absolutely. I love how... You wrote an article for Trends recently, for Trends Magazine, where you talked about the different burden that pet owners have when they're taking care of senior pets and financial is only a piece of that puzzle, and so many of the appointments we think it's about money but it may have nothing to do with money.

0:14:49.3 Mary Gardner: Right. So you could be... Maybe even if it's \$200 or something like that a month, or \$50, we think that's the only struggle, it's the only speed bump along the care, but it's not. I always say there are four. So the financial is one of them. The next is time, it takes a lot of time, and I did a study and it's about on average three hours a day that somebody's gonna care for

their senior pet, and that is making their meds or getting their meds together, getting their food ready, cleaning up after them, going for a slower walk, coming back from work early, coming to work in the middle of the day, go home from work from the middle of the day. If you give medications, we often give medications twice a day, especially pain management, but really they need it three to four times a day, but the owners can't give it 'cause they're not home for that.

0:15:41.1 Mary Gardner: So there's a time one. There's a physical budget, and we all think about a big Labrador and can this person help the dog with mobility issues? We always talk about the big dogs, and me, as a big tall girl, I can lift those big dogs, but even... I had one woman, she felt so bad because she couldn't handle her own Sheltie, she couldn't lift her Sheltie up to bring down the stairs. And if you were a little judgy for the day, you would think, "It's a 20-pound dog. How can you not lift your 20-pound dog and can get them down the stairs?" And then she shared with me, and she didn't have to, but she said, "I have rheumatoid arthritis and I can't lift my dog," and it just changed everything because now what I'm gonna recommend is very different for that pet parent that can't handle that.

0:16:27.3 Mary Gardner: And then lastly is the emotional budget. So are they able to handle the care? Are they able to handle the grief that's about to come? And that goes both ways. Sometimes people need to say goodbye sooner than later because they can't handle it for whatever the reasons may be. Maybe they felt they waited too long last time, maybe they've got 99 problems going on, and an incontinent dog also is going to just break them. And if anybody's had issues with their dogs or cats, they get it. Or maybe they're holding on because it's the last living link to a family member that they've lost and they can't bear to say goodbye. And we're very quick to judge and say, "I wish they would just euthanize this cat. It's horrible." I had this one gentleman, he called us and they were in their 50s.

0:17:17.4 Mary Gardner: And the clinic, I talked to the clinic, and the clinic was like, "Every day he comes in to get sub Q fluids, and this cat is like a pickle. We just want him to euthanize him." So I go to his home and his wife has early onset Alzheimer's, and he said, "She is going to be horrible if this cat is euthanized and dies. Period." So he's like, "But I can't euthanize because she's going to spin off the end." So I said, "Let's just do palliative care and try to hasten death a little bit." But the clinic didn't realize why he was holding on, it was because of his wife. So anyway, the stories and just the reality of life, we have to remember all four budgets, so it's the financial, the time, the physical and the emotional budget, and if any one of those is up for a family, I help them say goodbye, even if I could lift the Sheltie. It doesn't matter. She can't.

0:18:14.2 Katie Berlin: I mean, I love the way that you framed that, and I do think judgment comes in a lot in these appointments. It's so easy, it doesn't make you a bad person if you're having a horrifically busy day, like you have three emergencies that are on their way in and you're in the room, and the woman's like, "I can't lift my 20-pound Sheltie." It doesn't make you a bad person [0:18:36.1] ____ why or feel like you would do this for that dog, why can't she? But taking it to that next level by asking and getting to the bottom of it, doesn't have to take a lot of time, and it could totally change the outcome of what you do for that pet.

0:18:58.0 Mary Gardner: Yeah. You gotta build a connection. And so asking questions in a non-judgmental way. Like, "Tell me more about what's going on at home." And if they're like, "Listen, we're in the middle of a divorce and I can't..." And they don't have to share these things, but I think when you ask in a kind, non-judgmental way, people will share. And it's very powerful. And then

when you're able to flip that switch and say, "Okay, I understand. I'm here to help support you. Whatever that means." Then they probably will make the best decision for them, whatever that is.

0:19:30.1 Katie Berlin: Yeah. So we're talking about people who have brought their pets in, people who know that their senior pet needs care. Whether or not it's care that they can help provide. And you had mentioned before that in your research, you found that so many of the pets that you go to their homes to euthanize have not actually been to a vet in the last year to actually receive treatment.

0:19:54.8 Mary Gardner: Correct. And that's not actually Lap of Love. This is... I worked with a company called Vet Success, and we data analyzed almost a million pets that were euthanized in clinics across the country. And those were 50%. It's a little higher in cats, and about 44% in dogs and 50 something percent in cats.

0:20:11.6 Katie Berlin: It's so many.

0:20:13.0 Mary Gardner: It's so many, a year before they die, and that's a big year. That's the last 10% of many of their lifetimes or 8%, and we can help so much. So that's... So it's not just our Lap of Love data, it's actually clinic data, and there are so many things that we could do that isn't difficult, that isn't hard. And I think a lot of people have a misconception that all we're gonna do is wanna do blood work and x-rays, and fecal exams, and yet the dog hasn't left the house in two years.

0:20:42.7 Katie Berlin: Yeah. Or judge them for the way that pet looks like their scruffy old little white dog with no hair.

0:20:48.7 Mary Gardner: I love those.

0:20:50.7 Katie Berlin: I know, and I love it even more when they come in with like... We had this older gentleman that came in, he wore suspenders, and he had this white... This little white dog that used to be fluffy that would run in next to him on the leash and they were so attached. And I remember... That was in 2010, I think. And I still remember.

0:21:08.9 Mary Gardner: And you remember that?

0:21:10.8 Katie Berlin: Yeah. So how can we get these pets in and can we use storytelling to get more of these pets into the clinic before it's...

0:21:21.5 Mary Gardner: Yes. Okay, so one of the things I preach so much when I'm lecturing is about just websites. 'Cause they're not coming in, so they're not gonna get your information when you get there. So you can have all these beautiful brochures in your clinic, but if you don't have content on your website, and I want... I challenge everybody to go look at their websites and tell me what their senior or geriatric pages are about. And if it's just says, "We recommend coming in for twice yearly exams for blah, blah, blah." Which is great and we recommend that in our guidelines. But if that's all we talk about, it's not going to bring people in. We have to hit the whys. So why is somebody searching? They're not just sitting there searching because they're, "Oh, I think it's time for Fluffy's exam."

0:22:03.2 Mary Gardner: They're searching because their dog has mobility issues, their cat has incontinence, their dog is crying at night and panting and pacing. So we have to get the top 10 things that are affecting our senior pets and write a whole big story about them and management tools and products to recommend and why should they come in to see you. 'Cause if they've got their immobile dog that could barely get up, talk about how helpful pain management can be. And with stories, people will remember data 22 times more when you wrap it around a story. And so what's great is every single person listening has tons of stories, and I promise you, you ask your families to send in videos or pictures they will, of their older pets. I put a call out for my books and I had to stop it, it was... There was so many.

0:22:52.3 Mary Gardner: So if you get a family member, if you say, "Hey, I heard you built Reggie a ramp at home. Can you send a video of him going up the stairs?" "Oh yeah, okay." And so have Reggie's video on your website with ramp information, how to ramp train a dog, these things. So I think we could do so much on websites because people are searching, they're searching. And we get all mad at Dr. Google, but the only thing Dr. Google is, is a page that has the content that they're looking for, so we need to have it. And it's so easy and there are... And I know veterinary clinics are busy, so there are companies out there, there are veterinarians that are no longer in practice, but they write. So you can find people to write. There are technicians that could write this, they're great to do this too. So I think it's so much more than just saying, "You need to come in twice a year so we can uncover all the problems your dog has."

0:23:45.1 Katie Berlin: Yeah, you're so right, 'cause I wouldn't go in, and I own... I have two senior pets right now that own me, and they... But I don't wanna bring them in if I don't need to.

0:23:58.9 Mary Gardner: Right, why would I? And also, you need to make this a connection with them. And so if I look at a company's website, and almost all websites are like this, veterinary clinics. It's all puppies and kittens and adult pets, that's all that I see. I don't see an old sunken in skull and a scrawny cat, they're all like... The beautiful old dogs and cats that we see. 30% of pets on the website should be old and... Because if I'm looking for a veterinarian that's gonna understand my problems and my plights, I'm not gonna pick the one that's got puppies and kittens. So if I'm a senior human, am I gonna go to the pediatrician? No, I'm gonna go to a senior place. And 44% of our pets are double digits, 44%. So why don't we...

0:24:43.9 Katie Berlin: That's a crazy number to me.

0:24:45.5 Mary Gardner: It's crazy. So why don't we have content? And you know what, next time when people are at VMX or Western or any other conference, go look around the exhibit hall and all the pharmaceutical companies, all the people that are exhibiting, it's all young dogs and cats.

0:25:00.5 Katie Berlin: Yeah, that's... As you say that, and I think I remember that guy with the suspenders, that older gentleman with the suspenders and his little white dog from 12 years ago. And yet the puppy and kitten visits for the most part kind of blend together.

0:25:18.9 Mary Gardner: Yeah, they do.

0:25:19.8 Katie Berlin: It's a lot of playing and it's a lot of joy, but it doesn't just grab your heart the same way so that you really remember that story.

0:25:26.1 Mary Gardner: Yep. And the people...

0:25:27.4 Katie Berlin: Except in the cases where the puppy and kitten maybe came to a family that had just lost a senior pet, and I was so happy for them.

0:25:34.2 Mary Gardner: That is true. That... No, no, no, you're so right. I just I wanna encourage clinics to really adapt some of their marketing to the seniors and not just scary. I also don't want to say... I know we talked a lot about euthanasia. I don't wanna almost marry the two together, although it is something we need to talk about. But we need to celebrate. I've got so many birthday videos and pictures from people, they're like, "Maple just had her 16th birthday, here's her picture with her party hat on."

0:26:01.2 Katie Berlin: Oh, I love that.

0:26:02.2 Mary Gardner: Put that on the website, right? It's great.

0:26:04.4 Katie Berlin: Yeah. Okay, so we're talking about all of the things that really tug your heart strings when you're scrolling through social media. I don't know if you follow the site, We Rate Dogs.

0:26:19.6 Mary Gardner: No.

0:26:20.4 Katie Berlin: It's so cute. And people send in their pictures and then they rate them and it's always more than 10 out of 10, 'cause they're just the cutest thing.

0:26:26.8 Mary Gardner: Of course.

0:26:26.9 Katie Berlin: But the ones that I feel like are always the most popular, the grey muzzles and the...

0:26:31.9 Mary Gardner: It's so true. We... People don't think that, but... Marketing people don't think that, but it is true. And we all say, "Aw." when you see an old dog or cat, and that's pulling on your heart strings. So that's what you want.

0:26:44.4 Katie Berlin: Yeah. And we know that our teams are looking at these pictures too and feeling the same pull, it's not just veterinarians sort of doling out these recommendations, it's... The entire team gets really involved in these stories, and sometimes the team sees that pet more than the veterinarian does. Like those cats that show up for sub Q fluids three times a week or whatever. So, how can we better utilize the team in senior care?

0:27:10.1 Mary Gardner: Oh my gosh, when I lecture on geriatrics and hospice too, the longest line of people after my lecture, 'cause there's always about 30 minutes of talk time you have to do after a lecture. It's... My longest line is with the technicians. They all want to be involved. They are like, "How can I get more involved with hospice, with senior pets?" They are eating this stuff up. So ask... If you've got a rock star technician, make them the compassion care leader or whatever it may be. And whether that's for the euthanasia or for making sure like, "Hey, Rusty's coming in and he's a 13-year-old Golden with mobility issues. Let's make sure he's in the closest room to the exit, let's make sure there's bath mats, or yoga mats, so he can walk." Really focus on how to make a

clinic senior care friendly, and they're the best ones to do it.

0:28:01.6 Mary Gardner: They also can have really good... You train them well, and they want to know, trust me, have really good conversations with family about the care, about caregiver burden, about quality of life. There's no medicine in that, they don't have to be diagnosing or doing medicine, it is a conversation that so many technicians can be beautiful at. And then lastly, the front line, the support staff in the front, they need to be trained on how to answer questions that come in and also end of life questions. So when a family is calling in for a euthanasia, I've heard recordings that are absolutely horrific and this is lately still. I've been preaching this for over a decade, and lately they stumble on how to answer a question of a family. And they may even get the question, "How will I know it's time?" The worst thing you can do as a receptionist is to say, "Don't worry, you'll know." They don't know, they're calling you, that's why they...

0:28:54.0 Katie Berlin: Right.

0:28:56.5 Mary Gardner: Or, "Well, if he stops eating or stops wagging his tail." No, no, that's not actually what you should say. So, training them on these hard questions or know what the process is. If a caller is coming in with that, who does it go to? And not just stumbling over the euthanasia calls. So there's... Even our support staff in the kennel. You've got a senior pet staying there, there is a lot that we can do to help those guys, and it is very scary if you've got a senior or geriatric pet to leave them at a clinic for boarding, or for a day, it's really bad. If I had a million dollars, I would absolutely open my own senior care boarding facility. Because they...

0:29:37.0 Katie Berlin: That would be the cutest place on earth.

0:29:40.8 Mary Gardner: On earth. And people would pay double to stay there because I've got... I know I have to give medications, they're gonna have anxiety. They can't be in a run that doesn't have proper footing, the walk has to be slower. So even the kennel staff could be so involved. And send a video of Rusty going outside for his walk and getting love. That's what I wanna see as a pet parent, right?

0:30:05.6 Katie Berlin: Yeah. And our clinic that I worked at last didn't have boarding, but we senior pets stay with us all the time for the day for procedures or whatever. And those were some of the most beautiful photos that I've ever taken, or just one of the technicians leading the little tiny dogs and this far off the ground with his grey muzzle out to potty in the lawn after his dental. And we could all as veterinary teams, be using that power so much more like on social media, as you say, on our website. We don't always have to post the picture of the puppy visit, we can post the senior birthday.

0:30:48.2 Mary Gardner: Oh my gosh, the senior birthday. Or, look at your example that you just said. So here is this little Chihuahua or was it a Dachshund? Can't remember, little guy.

0:30:54.4 Katie Berlin: I'm picturing, this Dachshund, yeah.

0:30:56.2 Mary Gardner: Okay, see you have it...

0:30:58.5 Katie Berlin: He was eating in the gazebo, they took him out to the gazebo to have his snack for his bio acids test, is the one I'm thinking about.

0:31:07.7 Mary Gardner: Oh, it's a bio acid test, I love it. But imagine you have a Chihuahua that's just woken up from having a dental and he's going out for his walk. Take a picture and then share that this 16-year-old geriatric Chihuahua had his dental and here is in recovery. Because so many people are scared of anesthesia, and we cover that in our guidelines. And so they're not gonna be doing things like a dental cleaning or extractions or whatever else. Show the dog eating with no teeth, that he can still eat with no teeth. Oh my gosh, I would go nuts. I would love to work at a place if that is only senior geriatrics. Listen, tell me... If anybody's out there that that's all they do, I might need to send my resume there.

0:31:46.0 Katie Berlin: Oh, I would wanna hear about that. Yeah, if there is anybody listening who works in a practice or knows of a practice where it's strictly senior care. Like, you can't bring your pet there until they're seven or whatever.

0:31:58.0 Mary Gardner: Right. Exactly.

0:31:58.8 Katie Berlin: I would want to know this just because I think that we could learn so much from that practice. It's like cat only practices, totally different environment. Okay, so what do you think we could be doing differently in terms of valuing the work that our teams do? What are teams already doing that we consistently under-value and should really bring to the forefront and reward in terms of senior care?

0:32:27.0 Mary Gardner: Oh my gosh, that's such a deep question. I love this. I think it is the little things. If you see somebody taking the time to walk slower with that pet, or if you see somebody that... Did you know that the number one smell of a pet that lights their pleasure center of their brain is the smell of their owner? So if you see a technician or a front desk say, "Hey, do you have a t-shirt? Bring a t-shirt, I'll make sure it stays in the cage with them." If you see them be better at postoperative care because that's where the danger is, is post-operative care. Highlight that and share that story and say, "Hey, Dr. Katie did this with this pet. But here's the technician Jack, and this is what he did." And now we have a successful...

0:33:16.5 Mary Gardner: Share the success stories and why we don't have problems with anesthesia and things like that, and who's doing gentle handling. These guys are brittle, they're brittle, we're taking blood, and it's... And I see them getting held so rough as... For a five-year-old dog, it's not a big deal, but that's a 13-year-old dog and that's a big deal, and we're just holding them down. So really... There are the rock stars out there, and highlight that, because that's... Then everybody's gonna wanna do those things 'cause they want to get their own highlight also. So I think there are so many hidden treasures in our clinic, and we're just overwhelmed with what's going on, and we all know that focusing on a positive is a good thing, it's just... It's hard when you got a lot of negative.

0:34:07.4 Katie Berlin: It is, yeah. And I'm... Just a little off topic, that's how we roll. I'm reading this book, it's actually... It's called Bittersweet by Susan Cain and she wrote the book about introverts called Quiet. So she's a researcher. It's a great book, and it talks about how... The subtitle is, "How sorrow and longing make us whole." And so it talks about basically how it takes both sides of life, it takes the bitter in order to make the sweet sweeter. And there's so much bittersweet about the senior pet appointments, even when they're in fine shape. Because there's that anticipatory grief that you know is just hovering in the owner's mind that one day it's gonna be the end. I feel that

every time I sit here with Frank on my lap. I'm like, "One day, he's not gonna be on my lap." And...

0:34:58.3 Mary Gardner: Right. He's not gonna do his snore, his sweet little snore, I love it.

0:35:02.6 Katie Berlin: Yeah.

0:35:03.4 Mary Gardner: And we talk about that in the guidelines about the Healthy senior pet exam and what we should be doing. And it is bitter sweet. And I don't think a lot of people appreciate a anticipatory grief or even know about it.

0:35:22.3 Katie Berlin: Till you're in it.

0:35:22.4 Mary Gardner: Until you're in it, right. And we all... I was just talking to somebody yesterday, and he said, he's like, "Oh, when I saw my Weimaraner's nose, his nose not be so black like that and it was starting to lose its pigment." He's like, "I just got really sad. 'Cause I knew that he was getting older." Just the losing of the pigment. It's like me with my greys, I'm sad.

0:35:44.0 Katie Berlin: Yeah, like the passage of time suddenly seems so...

0:35:48.1 Mary Gardner: Exactly.

0:35:48.4 Katie Berlin: You're so aware of it. And senior...

0:35:50.6 Mary Gardner: Oh, I found a grey eyebrow hair the other day, and I freaked out.

0:35:50.7 Katie Berlin: Oh no.

0:35:50.8 Mary Gardner: It's no longer with me.

0:35:53.0 Katie Berlin: You gotta pluck that sucker.

0:35:53.1 Mary Gardner: I did.

0:35:58.7 Katie Berlin: Yeah, that acute awareness of the passage of time, I feel like is something that senior pets can really teach us to appreciate rather than fear, because we know that they're only with us for a certain amount of time.

0:36:11.4 Mary Gardner: Yeah listen, that's why I named my book It's Never Long Enough because it is not. I need at least 40 years.

0:36:17.6 Katie Berlin: For sure.

0:36:18.3 Mary Gardner: Frank needs another whatever, double?

0:36:20.1 Katie Berlin: Yeah. For sure.

0:36:20.4 Mary Gardner: He is. And I think that's why I love bucket lists. So many people think that they're silly, but oh my gosh, they're amazing.

0:36:25.9 Katie Berlin: But who doesn't remember that Subaru commercial, right?

0:36:29.0 Mary Gardner: Right, we all do. I have this one wonderful bucket list from a family, and so it was ED's bucket list, and she had having a steak dinner with dad, finding the new parks, all this stuff. Ride in a fire truck. And they took pictures of her doing every single one of those things and to see her face, her like hazy eyes, old hazy eye and scrawny little head in the fire truck with all these hot firemen was the best thing. They were all over her.

0:37:00.3 Katie Berlin: Oh my gosh.

0:37:01.2 Mary Gardner: It was so sweet and I show it during my lectures because it's just amazing, and now they'll always have those things. And I say when you do a bucket list, what's great is that, it doesn't make you not sad when they leave, but what it does, is it takes away some of the regret that you didn't do X, Y, Z with them. It makes you acutely aware of the things that you wanna do before the end. So take one more camping trip, one more whatever. Get a new scratching post and see them get excited. Whatever it is.

0:37:29.0 Katie Berlin: Yeah, I love that. In this book, she talks about how a lot of the sadness when we lose somebody is not just the loss, 'cause you've been preparing for that maybe. At least in the case of senior care, a lot of times it's a long gradual decline and not something sudden, but it's also the thought that what once was will never be again. You won't ever get those chances again, and just taking a minute to talk about that when you're in the room with people, what do you wanna do with him that we can help you do...

0:38:00.8 Mary Gardner: Oh my gosh. Yes.

0:38:00.8 Katie Berlin: Would be a really fun conversation.

0:38:02.9 Mary Gardner: And we could help you do. That's so fun. I love that, right? 'Cause if it is taking a...

0:38:07.4 Katie Berlin: Yeah. Like, what are your goals?

0:38:09.1 Mary Gardner: Not only goal of care, 'cause I talk so much about goals of care, but goals of fun. Right?

0:38:15.2 Katie Berlin: Yeah.

0:38:16.3 Mary Gardner: Like, okay, you wanna go on a trip and we need to make sure that he feels good, he's not anxious, like let me help prepare that for you.

0:38:21.2 Katie Berlin: Yeah, exactly.

0:38:22.8 Mary Gardner: Oh my gosh, that is so cool, and I think people get into it, that's... During my hospice talks, I will always have a conversation about that, and I think we should be doing that way sooner, we see them way too late at Lap of Love. Everybody wants to know what they could do. I'm like get them in to see you before they see us, and that's to start what we started

with, that's what makes me sad, I'm doing a bucket list on a dog that's got a week left, that's not on fun. I want to do it, I want to have a year.

0:38:52.6 Katie Berlin: Yeah. Oh I love that so much. Well, these senior guidelines, we've been talking about so much, that's not strictly medicine, right? Like, what can you do to make your practice more attractive and more inviting to senior pet owners, what can you do to maximize that appointment? Because when we feel sad after senior pet appointment, it's not 'cause we didn't know what tests to run, most of the time. Right? It's because one of those dates maybe didn't go... My old man wants to get on the floor.

0:39:23.5 Mary Gardner: I love it. You need to record your old man snoring just so you have it.

0:39:29.1 Katie Berlin: I know, I was just thinking that. I have all these videos on my phone and I'm never getting rid of them, right?

0:39:32.9 Mary Gardner: Never, no.

0:39:33.0 Katie Berlin: The extra iPhone storage just for the dog videos.

0:39:37.2 Mary Gardner: Yes.

0:39:38.9 Katie Berlin: And I'm sure I'm one of a billion people who have bought extra iPhone storage for that.

0:39:42.0 Mary Gardner: You're talking to one.

0:39:42.9 Katie Berlin: Yeah.

0:39:44.2 Mary Gardner: 100%.

0:39:44.7 Katie Berlin: But the guidelines are so worth checking out because they include so much of this as well as the medicine, which is... You'd have a hard time figuring out what's the most important aspect of senior care because it's such a holistic thing, when it's done well.

0:40:03.2 Mary Gardner: It really is, and I think... None of them, right, one is not more important than the other. It's a combination. I think what's also important to know is that just because we can doesn't mean we should.

0:40:14.9 Katie Berlin: Oh, yeah.

0:40:16.0 Mary Gardner: And a lot of times we get upset maybe because we wanna do X, we wanna do certain diagnostics, we wanna do certain medications or treatment options, and for whatever reason, the family may not be able to, whatever those reasons are. So okay, but we could still do palliative care, and we talk about that, right? So we could still do palliative care, what's interesting is me, for my own pets, actually, everybody thinks because I'm a hospice veterinarian that I don't do stuff, that I just do palliative care.

0:40:45.5 Katie Berlin: Yeah.

0:40:46.4 Mary Gardner: I'm quite the opposite with my own pets, they get everything, so my dog had spinal lymphoma and she had radiation, she had chemo, she got everything, rehab. And so many of my colleagues were like, you're really doing chemo? You're really doing that? And I'm like, if I get two extra months, yes, I'm going to do that. I'm very good at knowing her quality of life, and I'm not...

0:41:08.9 Katie Berlin: Right.

0:41:10.3 Mary Gardner: She's happy at a clinic, she makes friends with everybody. My other dog who's anxiety dog, he better not get sick because he's too anxious out of that clinic. Right?

0:41:19.2 Katie Berlin: Yeah, that's him.

0:41:20.1 Mary Gardner: So I would never... Yeah, so I would never do that. It's very important to know the pet's personality too.

0:41:25.2 Katie Berlin: For sure.

0:41:26.0 Mary Gardner: And what can they handle, especially as they get older, they change their attitude, and if they're not good during certain things, then I don't wanna stress them out and break that human-animal bond. I don't want to be chasing them for so much drugs and they're gonna have anticipatory drugs, the pet knows the owners come in, really comes down to do not judge. And that's pretty key in everything in life is do not judge, 'cause we are not walking in everybody's shoes, which is why I think we all wanna make sure that there's no pain or anxiety, so if we could really come to a common ground with the family and just say, "Listen, I'm okay if you don't wanna do X, Y, Z, but wouldn't you agree that we wanna make sure that Max is not painful or he doesn't have an anxiety?" Nobody's gonna say no.

0:42:13.3 Katie Berlin: Right.

0:42:14.5 Mary Gardner: Nobody is gonna say, "Uh, no, Dr. Berlin, I don't think that's... I think pain is okay."

0:42:17.6 Katie Berlin: Right, I actually want him to suffer. Yeah.

0:42:19.2 Mary Gardner: Right.

0:42:21.3 Katie Berlin: Nobody's ever said that.

0:42:22.7 Mary Gardner: Nobody's... Right. Said no one, right? So you say, wouldn't you agree that we wanna make sure... Wouldn't you agree, it's like the best Jedi mind trick. Then they're gonna say, you know... Yes. Okay, but to ensure that here's what we need to do, because we don't have to do every treatment option, we don't have to do all the medicine, but we want to help them with their pain and anxiety, just like us as we get older, you know, there's another great book, When Breath Becomes Air.

0:42:49.0 Katie Berlin: Oh yeah, it's beautiful.

0:42:49.8 Mary Gardner: Such an amazing book.

0:42:52.2 Katie Berlin: So this has become a book club episode, and we're gonna put links to these books as well as Dr. Mary's two recently released books, which are amazing and beautiful and long, long overdue, I think, for people.

0:43:05.9 Mary Gardner: Oh, thank you.

0:43:07.4 Katie Berlin: Great resources, but yeah, I love that book. Sorry.

0:43:08.6 Mary Gardner: Yeah. It's really good.

0:43:08.9 Katie Berlin: I'm excited.

0:43:10.0 Mary Gardner: And it's basically about... That's not just about this, but it's a doctor who gets cancer himself and just his decisions not to do certain treatment, so it's very interesting.

0:43:21.8 Katie Berlin: Yeah, okay. We've talked a lot about all the different aspects of senior care, including what happens when it's getting near the end, and including when people can't stop thinking about the end even if it's not close, I'm raising my hand. Just part of life, and ways that we can celebrate the team and show that the team could be an integral part of senior care. I love when you said you could have one person on the team maybe be like the champion for Senior Care, because we have these certificate programs coming out now at AAHA, which are called champion certificates. And so we all have one for senior care at some point, so that will mean that you can be a senior care champion and really own that role in your practice no matter what your job is.

0:44:11.1 Mary Gardner: I love that. Yes. Oh that's so good.

0:44:13.9 Katie Berlin: Yeah, and I'm really excited about that.

0:44:15.2 Mary Gardner: I want that certificate.

0:44:16.7 Katie Berlin: Right? Yeah. You might be helping write it, who knows. Stay tuned, Dr. Mary.

0:44:22.8 Mary Gardner: I want to get grandfathered in.

0:44:25.8 Katie Berlin: But I just love that because senior pets deserve it, they deserve a champion at your practice, at every practice, at Home Depot, at PetSmart, wherever they go, they deserve somebody to be in their corner cheering for them because they're the best and they have nothing but love, and it's uncomplicated love, and that's the best kind. Okay. So to close out, Dr. Mary, I have one more question for you.

0:44:49.7 Mary Gardner: Okay.

0:44:51.2 Katie Berlin: What is one thing that anybody listening, no matter their role in the practice, could do differently when they go into work tomorrow, when it comes to senior care?

0:45:00.8 Mary Gardner: You know, I think for me, it's about compassion, so many people ask me to do talks on compassion fatigue, and I say, I can't do that because I don't have compassion fatigue. I have compassion overload, that's... I just don't have that. Do I have drive fatigue? Yes. Do I have partner fatigue? Yes. Do I have... Spouse fatigue is what I mean. Do I have... Whatever. Family fatigue, yes. So for me, compassion has a couple of ingredients, and the first one is recognition of the suffering that I see. The second is wanting to change that. The third is not being attached to the outcome.

0:45:39.1 Mary Gardner: And I think it's really important for us not to get so attached to the outcome, 'cause that will bring us compassion fatigue, and when it comes to euthanasia, what everybody can remember tomorrow for the next euthanasia that they do, that they may not be in charge of why they're euthanizing, but they can be in charge of how. And if you do that well, you will pillow your head at night, and that's what I encourage everybody to do, is improve one thing in their euthanasia protocol, whether it's what they say from the entrance or the exit, to sedation protocol to whatever it may be, and I promise you, the euthanasias will be better each time.

0:46:19.3 Katie Berlin: I love that. That's so profound. Not being attached to the outcome, because it's so easy to get personally involved, and that's why we're good at what we do, 'cause it feels so personal, and at the same time, it's not our decision to make.

0:46:35.9 Mary Gardner: Yeah, and I'm gonna butcher her quote, but Megan [0:46:41.9] _____, the wonderful technician, she's a speaker too, so she says, I cannot shoulder the responsibility of all the animals in the world. Right? Something like that. And she said it once, and I'm like, oh, that was genius, because we can't. It is not my responsibility to do that. And it's hard because we love them all and we don't want them to suffer, but we will suffer and we won't be able to continue work if we do become attached to these outcomes.

0:47:08.6 Katie Berlin: Yeah, and a euthanasia done beautifully is a guarantee of no suffering.

0:47:14.2 Mary Gardner: Yeah, it's a guarantee of no suffering, and I leave a euthanasia and I'm like, I rocked it, I did a great job. I could be crying but I still leave there feeling very fulfilled in what I do because I know I did a great job. I don't always do a great job. I put my foot in my mouth, I say something, I can't find a vein, whatever, but when I do a good job, I'm happy 'cause I know I gave the family the best experience ever and I get the best hugs.

0:47:39.5 Katie Berlin: Yeah, Dr. Mary Gardner, thank you so much, this was so fun.

0:47:45.1 Mary Gardner: I know. It went fast.

0:47:48.1 Katie Berlin: And I could talk to you about Grey Muzzles all day.

0:47:52.6 Mary Gardner: All day.

0:47:52.7 Katie Berlin: And I'm sure you do talk about them all day, but we will definitely put links to your two newest books. 'It's Never Long Enough For Senior Dog People,' and 'Nine lives Are Not Enough,' because we can't forget about the kitties.

0:48:06.3 Mary Gardner: Never.

0:48:07.8 Katie Berlin: And we'll put links to those in the show notes.

0:48:10.9 Mary Gardner: Thank you.

0:48:11.8 Katie Berlin: And as well as more information about Lap of Love, because everybody should know what it's like to be able to say goodbye in their own home, it's the most peaceful thing in the world, so I really, really appreciate you coming on, spending your time and for everything that you do.

0:48:26.2 Mary Gardner: Yes, thanks for having me and thanks AAHA, inviting me into the committee, it was great, it was a lot of fun working with all the committee members.

0:48:34.4 Katie Berlin: Yeah, so check out the guidelines. See 2023 AAHA Senior Care Guidelines, which are gonna be out when this episode airs and they're gonna be at aaha.org/senior-care.

0:48:48.9 Mary Gardner: Yes.

0:48:50.7 Katie Berlin: Thank you all for listening, and we'll catch you next time on Central Line.