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A shocking court story prompts a warning for vets and pet owners. **Karen Cornish** has the facts.

A pet crematorium scam was uncovered in August 2009 when the bodies of three dogs, two cats and a guinea pig were found in a field near Ripley, Derbyshire, and identified through their microchips. Pet owners who believed their cats and dogs had been cremated were horrified to learn that their bodies had instead been callously dumped.

An investigation followed and in February the manager of Peak Pet Cremations in Heage, Emma Bent, was sentenced to eight months in prison. Derby Crown Court heard that Bent, who admitted seven counts of fraud and a series of environmental and trading standards offences, had a deal with Ambivet Veterinary Group, which has four practices in Derbyshire.

Bent was not licensed to carry out pet cremations, yet Ambivet had sent more than 2,800 pets and bags of clinical waste to Peak Pet Cremations. Although the fraud case covered just six pets, the Environment Agency said it was 'impossible' to know how many other owners had been affected.

To cover up what was really happening Bent sent owners what they believed to be their pets' ashes — but when these were later examined they were found to be nothing more than bonfire remains.

TV vet Joe Inglis presented a section on the BBC's 'Inside Out' programme about the Peak Pet Cremations case.

"I was absolutely disgusted by what happened and shocked that anyone could treat pets and recently bereaved owners with such callous disregard," says Joe. "It also worried me that this may not have been a one-off and that this could

Not all crematoria offer the same high standard of service so it's worth making enquiries.

Don't let a poor practice ruin your cat's memory.



in peace



just be the tip of a much more widespread problem.”

Joe has the following advice for pet owners and vets: “To owners I would advise asking your 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 as this kind of hands-on inspection is the only way we can make sure that scandals like Peak Pet Cremations never happen again.”

Future assurance

As a result of this distressing case, the Association of Private Pet Cemeteries and Crematoria (APPCC) has launched a membership scheme, which includes an ethical selling code for pet cremation to help vets prevent pet cremation fraud.

Lizzie Lockett, spokesperson for the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS), comments: “The bond between an animal, owner and their vet is very important, and it’s reasonable for clients to expect that any services provided to them by the veterinary practice — whether provided directly or via a recommended third party — should be appropriately licensed, and that the practice will have made all reasonable checks to ensure this.

“We have had a letter from the APPCC and the topic of the guidance provided for the profession will be considered at the next meeting of our Advisory Committee.”

The APPCC has found that, on the whole, pet owners are not being given a clear enough explanation of the options when their pet dies. This can lead to incorrect assumptions about what the services involve and uninformed decisions being made.

“A pet owner has essentially three choices when their pet dies: cremation, burial in a pet cemetery or burial at home,” explains Kevin Spurgeon, APPCC director. “The problem is that within the cremation option there are many different ways that a pet

could be handled and cremated and, at present, they are either incorrectly described by vets or not described at all. In my experience, some vets do not go through the options clearly and will restrict people to the company that they use.

“I would prefer to see vets offer two different companies, describe the difference in the service on offer accurately, and then give the owner at least 24 hours to make a decision.”

No pet owner wants to think ahead to the death of a beloved cat or dog, but by taking a little time now to understand the options available you could save yourself additional heartbreak in the future. ■

CREMATION OPTIONS EXPLAINED

- **Individual cremation:** a pet is cremated on its own in an enclosed chamber and the owner has the choice of either having the ashes of their pet returned to them or scattered in a memorial garden at the crematorium.
- **Communal cremation with separation of ashes:** a pet is placed in a chamber at the same time as other pets with some sort of separation, like a numbered tray, and cremated simultaneously. Owners should receive some or all of their pet’s ashes back, but some mixing may occur.
- **Communal cremation:** a small group of pets are cremated together and their ashes scattered in a memorial garden.
- **Disposal by incineration:** a standard disposal operation with no special handling. Pets are cremated en masse and ashes are taken to landfill.

Questions to ask if you choose an individual cremation for your pet:

- **Where will my pet be stored and how will they be collected?** Most crematoria collect from veterinary surgeries on a weekly or bi-weekly basis — but if you are not happy with this, find a service that can collect responsively.
- **How will my pet be cremated?** If asking for an individual cremation most people envisage this means your pet will be on its own within an enclosed chamber. The APPCC Code of Practice clearly defines this, but only APPCC members have to adhere to it.
- **How will the ashes be removed?** A good pet crematorium will clear the chamber using a hearth rake and/or brush to ensure it is fully cleansed before the next cremation.
- **Can I visit and inspect the facilities?** You should be able to see every part of the crematorium if you wish to.
- **Is the crematorium a member of the APPCC?** Although there are non-members who offer genuine services, the only pet cemeteries and crematoria that adhere to an accurate description of the after-death care options being offered are APPCC members.

For more information about pet cremation or to find your nearest APPCC member, visit www.appcc.org.uk (tel. 01252 844478). The facilities and location around the country may affect the cost. Typically expect to pay from around £100 for a basic individual service for a cat.



A peaceful resting place: the final gift we can give our pets.

Photos: courtesy APPCC