

# Unwanted pets

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## ABSTRACT

Western culture places unusually high value on the lives of companion 'types' of animals. Our society's horror of death is sometimes displaced to include death in pet animal species also. The great anxiety expressed by some people about the fate of discarded 'pet' type animals is not surprising. It is because of this kind of anxiety that humane societies have long argued that subsidised neutering must be a better way to deal with the unwanted pet problem than having to rely on various methods of mass killing. Optimism about subsidised neutering as a remedial measure for this animal welfare problem, however, has faded over the last decade. A number of reasons for this are suggested. Alternative remedial approaches are discussed.

## INTRODUCTION

### Death and pets

There is quite a body of current literature on the subject and science of death, dying and coping with human mortality. Stages of grief and patterns of sorrow relating to human death have been well explored in the fields of psychiatry and general medical practice (Lindemann 1944; Kubler-Ross 1969). People employed in companion animal practice often see the exact same symptoms of grief in pet owners who have been separated from their companion animals by pet death.

In Joseph Bayly's *The Last Thing We Talk About* (1969), which looked into the reasons for our society's horror of death, the following statements were made:

*For one thing, death is the supreme enigma. We cannot explain its mystery and the unknown makes us fear.*

*Another element of death that is unnatural. and makes us dread. is the pain that frequently accompanies dying.*

*Then there's the termination of every human relationship. This termination may be quite abrupt, providing no opportunity to set affairs in order.*

*Decomposition is another element of death that contributes to our sense of dread. We spend a lifetime caring for our bodies,. it is hardly pleasant to contemplate a time when they will return to dust.*

*The sort of taboo Victorians placed on public discussion of sex has been transferred to the discussion of death by our culture.*

While some people seem to cope with the death of human companions without too much stress, for others, dwelling on the processes of death and dying can become an obsessive preoccupation. It seems reasonable to expect the same variation in people with reference to coping with death in pet species. People having an unusually strong need to 'save' cats and dogs from death probably represent an extreme position. This position may not reflect the community norm and such people may be more motivated by their own personal problems about death than by concerns for animal welfare.

## **Cultural ambiguity in evaluating animal life**

In reviewing cultural attitudes to pet animals in three 'pre-European' South West Pacific societies, Fisher (1983) showed how, in these societies, pigs and dogs could legitimately be treated either as fully fledged pets (on occasions even being breast fed by women) or, at the other extreme, as valuable consumable produce. In the absence of individual attachment to the pigs or dogs in question, these animals ceased to be considered pets and could be consumed with relish - and were so, regularly. In other words, it was quite acceptable to eat the animals in question, so long as they belonged to strangers.

The variable status of animals in these societies seems to have been a robust, practical and uncomplicated arrangement. The key factor explaining the different 'animal value' was simply the presence or absence of *attachment*.

Our contemporary (multi-cultural) society, by comparison, struggles along with a much more complicated and confused traditional appreciation of pets. It is impossible not to marvel at how our society's conscience is untroubled by the daily slaughter of thousands of 'food' animals such as fat lambs or blue fin tuna destined for our dinner plates, and yet disturbed by the thought of humanely destroying and disposing of a relative handful of 'pet' type animals that nobody wants.

Perception of the value of pet animals and the significance of the lives of pet animals varies greatly from individual to individual in our society .

While some people class cats and dogs (in general) as nothing better than environmental pests, others find the companionship of these animals even more rewarding than that of other humans. Maybe this variable evaluation of pets and pet life is a function of cultural and social environmental effects. Maybe it is a function of individual personal experience. Whatever the reason, variation is something we have plenty of when it comes to pet appreciation.

It was apparently very uncomplicated for the Papua New Guinean Highlanders with their pigs and the Australian Aborigines with their dogs, to confidently identify what was the socially acceptable and morally reasonable attitude to the treatment of 'pet' animals. We do not have the luxury of such social norms in our 'advanced' society today.

So, while some pet owners seem to exhibit little or no appreciation of the value of the lives of even their own dogs and cats, others are moved to genuine grief over the loss of 'pet' life generally. This grief may be expressed in situations where no personal attachment is involved and even when the animals in question are sometimes little better than feral pests. Though their position is not necessarily representative of the community at large, it is not surprising that community groups with the latter point of view should be distressed by the plight of unwanted pet animals and be moved to do whatever possible to save them.

## **Euthanasia**

According to Christian tradition, mankind has dominion over all other living things on earth. The sanctity of human life, deemed so important to the culture of western society because of divine edict in Christian tradition, has not generally been interpreted as extending to include other animals. In James Rachel's impressive essay on euthanasia and morality (1986), he points out how, because of this traditional 'life value' distinction, animal euthanasia on humane grounds is (in absolute comparison to human euthanasia) generally accepted as an 'as of right' treatment option regardless of circumstances.

While this may be generally so, for more and more people the sanctity of life question does not stop with human life. For these people the problem with human euthanasia which relates to judgement of the distinction between 'mercy killing' and 'murder', applies for animals as well. For the purposes of this paper, the animals in question are unwanted pets. The moral issues at stake with unwanted pets are as disturbing for some people as are the issues associated with abortion.

Rachel (1986) also mentions the traditional Christian concept of sanctity being associated only with the lives of innocents as distinct from conscious wrong doers.

Though we are not discussing human life here, there are, none the less, clear 'innocence' factors involved with abandoned and unwanted pet animals. It may be that for some people who feel about pets as they feel about people, the taking of the 'innocent lives' of the animal victims of careless owners, is a cause of moral concern.

### **Death in the animal shelter**

In his address to the 1974 Chicago Conference on the Ecology of the Surplus Dog and Cat Problem, John Hoyt (President at that time of the Humane Society of the United States) made the following comments in a paper called 'A Case for Spay/Neuter Clinics':

*Let me tell you we are tired of being called murderers; we are tired of having our animal shelters described as Auschwitzes and Buchenwalds; we are tired of having to defend this destruction in the name of humaneness!*

*I doubt that some of you can begin to appreciate the castigation and censure that have been laid at the door of the humane movement because of its very reluctant willingness to destroy millions of animals annually.*

*I speak from the position of one whose concern and perspective derives from a deep commitment to prevent suffering and cruelty to animals.*

*Surely there must be a better way, a more positive way, a more humane way?*

*Can you blame us for seeking a more positive approach? Can you really regard such alternatives (spay/neuter clinics) as inappropriate?*

The sincerity and the depth of feeling expressed by Hoyt (1974) is manifest. What is most important from our perspective, is that those comments, now 20 years old, are no different to the contemporary pleas of spokespersons representing animal shelters and humane societies in Australia today. The expressions of concern are similar today. The pleas for understanding and assistance are unchanged also. Our community continues to generate excessive numbers of unwanted pets for humane societies to deal with.

### **The case for neuter clinics**

Although subsidised neutering has been well and truly tried over the many years since 1974, there is no evidence to indicate that this approach to solve the unwanted pet problem ever warranted optimistic expectations.

In opening his address at the Chicago conference, Hoyt (1974) said:

*To me has been given the somewhat unenviable task of setting forth the case for the need of spay/neuter clinics as part of an overall program to reduce the vast and ever growing numbers of surplus dogs and cats populating our society today.*

Later on in his paper, Hoyt also said:

*I shall concentrate on stating the case for spay/neuter clinics not a defence for their success.*

There is a suggestion from these comments that even the author of that paper titled 'A Case for Spay/Neuter Clinics' was more confident that *something* had to be done, than that spay/neuter clinics were the real answer.

### **SUBSIDISED NEUTER SCHEMES**

The essential component of all subsidised neuter schemes is that someone other than the owner (or the prospective owner) pays for all or part of the cost of pet desexing. The amount of the subsidy may be contributed by veterinary practitioners, by humane societies, by council rate payers or by some combination of the these.

The mechanics of these schemes may involve some kind of voucher device to provide a document link between the source of the pet, the place of desexing and possibly the agency providing the concession as well.

Animal Welfare institutions around the world over decades have invested heavily in trying to curb burgeoning populations of unwanted pets using the subsidised neuter approach. Despite this effort, little success has so far been achieved. The numbers of unwanted pets appears to be increasing (Olson *et al* 1986) and pet population problem continues to be a serious issue (Carter 1991).

History suggests that seeking remedies for the unwanted pet problem in subsidised neutering, though sounding and looking superficially attractive, is an error. It seems now that the only effect of subsidised pet neuter schemes in all their different forms is to change where the desexing procedure is carried out and who pays. The number of pets actually desexed seems to stay much the same.

The scientific literature (Arkow 1991; Beaver 1991) does not indicate that subsidised pet neuter schemes have anywhere been successful in reducing unwanted pet numbers.

There is no evidence to support the assumption that these schemes effectively reduce the rate of pet abandonment, improve pet owner responsibility or help solve general urban animal management problems for local government.

### **Shelter neuter schemes**

Beck (1983) pointed out a decade ago how expectation of general pet population breeding control from desexing schemes for rehomed dogs at animal shelters and pounds was statistically insupportable. Research carried out in Townsville (Murray 1991) showed that only 7% of the city dog population had been obtained from the pound or the animal shelter source and this proportion was showing signs of reducing still further. Because this proportion was so small and because the 'right' kind of new owner if carefully (and indeed properly) selected by shelter staff will attend to the desexing anyway, spending money on a neuter scheme involving pets specifically obtained from this source, seemed pointless.

Spending time and money on animal shelter neuter schemes is like raking leaves in a wind storm (Nowell 1978). Raking leaves in a wind storm is fine if that is what you like to do. But, as Nowell (1978) was pointing out, don't expect things to look much different when you are done.

In defence of neuter schemes at animal shelters, it is important to consider how badly animal shelter staff are affected by the unpleasant business of large scale euthanasia. An informative paper on the subject of animal shelter culture (Arluke 1991) identified a range of well defined methods that have evolved in animal shelters for coping with the trauma of working with unwanted pets.

These methods included careful staff employment techniques, accommodating for the natural concern of workers, concentrating on technical aspects rather than the 'deed' of euthanasia, identifying positive aspects of caring for unwanted pets, encouraging responsibility displacement, promoting task-mate support systems and managing attachment instincts to concentrate on positives.

Although not mentioned by Arluke (1991), the activity of desexing pets for rehoming may be another kind of 'coping measure' adopted by animal shelter personnel. From the perspective of people working within the animal shelter environment, desexing pets for rehoming undoubtedly seems like a 'positive' activity even though the reality is much less encouraging. While this procedure appears unlikely to ever significantly affect the overall effect of pet neglect, this activity may never the less be quite valuable in the context of a staff 'coping measure' in animal shelter function. Animal shelter neuter schemes may serve a useful palliative role by ameliorating the feeling of distress animal shelter workers suffer from being associated with the other ever-present depressing aspects of animal shelter activity .

## **Indigent pet owner schemes**

On the subject of desexing schemes for indigent (poor) pet owners the situation is much the same. Iris Nowell, in *Dog Crisis* (1978) observed :

*People who say they cannot afford to sterilise their pets arouse no sympathy today. The animal welfare movement continually reminds people ... If you can afford a pet, you can afford to spay it.* (Nowell 1978)

Once again, even though these comments are 15 years old today, the philosophy still has integrity. The concept of 'owner onus' is still of paramount importance now, just as it was then. Under these circumstances, as with animal shelter neuter schemes, it is hard to see what subsidised neutering of the pets of indigent persons has to offer as a remedy for the general plight of unwanted pets.

## **SHIFTING PARADIGMS**

At the same Chicago conference addressed by Hoyt (cited in the Introduction), Beck (1974) expressed frustration at the fact that essential epidemiological factors were continuing to be overlooked in contemporary methods intended to overcome the problem of pet abandonment and surrender. He pointed out how the problems in 1974 were no different from those in 1920 when similar popular remedies had failed. Beck (1974) observed that not much had changed in the 55 years preceding the Chicago conference. In 1993, 20 years on from the Chicago conference, that situation is still little changed.

Recommended remedies for the unwanted pet problem have always tended to concentrate on pet reproductivity and the merit of intervention at the pet level. Subsidised neuter initiatives hinge on the premise that discount incentives can tip the 'neuter balance' sufficiently to make a real difference in the effect of this interdiction.

The failure of these schemes (despite enormous financial investment over many years past) suggests that popular paradigms of the unwanted pet problem have been invalid. It appears now that the various kinds of subsidised neuter schemes fail to make the desired impression. It is now being suggested that excessive numbers of unwanted pets are more correctly a result of careless pet ownership than of excessive breeding capacity *per se*.

At this stage, subsidised pet neuter schemes appear to be no more than 'bandaid' treatments for a complex sociological problem that has to date been poorly researched and inadequately understood. The inference is that interdiction needs to be directed at *pet owners* rather than *pet*.

Beck was correct:

- a. We must look at the epidemiology of this problem rather than dwell on the confusing emotionality of the symptoms.
- b. We must also focus in on the fact that pet problems including this one are more correctly described as people problems.

Future attempts to resolve this problem warrant much greater emphasis on the human factors involved in pet abandonment and surrender. This paper looks at some of those 'human factors' with a view to perhaps reshaping the paradigms and hopefully doing better in future. Let us not waste another 20 years relearning the same lessons.

## **DEMAND LINKED PET BREEDING**

The wastage rate of domestic pets through abandonment or surrender appears now to be (particularly for dogs) as much a matter of over-demand as of over-supply (Fredrickson 1975; Schneider 1975; Searle 1979). Searle (1979) explained how, because of this demand effect, even the much vaunted 'Los Angeles spay scheme' only had a temporary impact on the numbers of unwanted pets in that city .

The supply of pets would seem to be driven by demand like most other consumer commodities. While ever the demand continues to be in many cases, without a sensible ownership commitment, the numbers of pets that become discarded will continue to be unacceptably high. Most discarded pets are the product of inappropriate acquisition. The wrong type of pet or the pet acquired for the wrong reason will always become at least neglected and probably worse treated.

As Marshal (1979) observed, some 80% of dogs processed at pounds and animal shelters are only there through a lack of sincere owner commitment. The same sort of comment was made by Upton (1992) in reference to the dogs at an animal shelter in Brisbane. It is an important point that continues to given inadequate attention.

The active marketing of pets serves only to compound an over demand situation. The use of pet marketing techniques that might rely on the tendency of some people to impulse buy, acquire out of sympathy or purchase simply to keep up some kind of appearances are better for selling pets than for establishing lasting human-companion animal bonds.

Demand-linked breeding of pets tends to be a money business. Pet owners sometimes see breeding as a way to recoup their own pet purchase expenses. Sales are more often than not heedless of the suitability of the pet or the capability of the prospective owner.

Equally important in the unwanted pet pathway involving demand-linked breeding is the fact that if the 'demand' perceived by the breeder is imagined rather than real, the puppies or kittens will eventually go to anybody who will take them. Any manipulations necessary to achieve this may be considered acceptable and possibly even responsible and caring. Although some pets are doomed by circumstances that have little to do with their original price tag, their prospects are worse if they are obtained cheaply. As Arkow (1985) pointed out, pets acquired as gifts, obtained cheaply or obtained on impulse can expect to enjoy little security of tenure in the household into which they have been introduced. Arkow (1985) commented also on the curious way in which a person's personal investment in a pet's welfare seemed to be affected in part by their financial equity in the animal.

While puppies and kittens are the intended product of demand-linked breeding, this does not necessarily mean they will become successful, valued, life long pets. If the links between the pets and their prospective owners are not made carefully, the mismatched pets are prone to end as shelter fodder.

## **PERSONALITY LINKED PET BREEDING**

Personality linked reasons for failing to desex pets or adopt other prophylactic measures to prevent pet breeding fall into at least 9 categories as follows:

- There is in the minds of some pet owners a perception that desexing is a form of mutilation or that desexed pets suffer from the deprivation of sexual fulfilment (Levinson 1974; Nowell 1978);
- Pet owners sometimes feel psychologically uncomfortable about having an emasculated pet. This may be because some people selectively choose to have pets that they think, as Leigh (1966) pointed out, are statements of their own valued personal characteristics. Desexing a pet may be construed by such people as being tantamount to self castration (Levinson 1974);
- People sometimes incorrectly maintain that pets should be allowed to breed because this improves their maturity and general demeanour (Olson *et al.* 1986);
- Some owners incorrectly maintain that desexed pets are likely to become overweight because they have been desexed (Nowell 1987; Olson *et al.* 1986);
- Most dog breed societies and kennel clubs actively discourage their members from desexing 'show' or 'trial' dogs (Stockner, 1991 ). An attitude promoted by such institutions encourages the notion that reproducing the 'qualify' genetic characteristics in pedigreed pets is an inherent part of their value;
- Expenditure on pets has a low priority for uncommitted owners (Slobody 1976; Stockner 1991);
- The plight of unwanted pets is of little concern to people for whom animal welfare has a low priority (Arkow 1991; Olson *et al.* 1991).

- Some pet owners derive pleasure from the sexual activity of their pets. This sexual activity may be either with themselves or with other animals. Copulation, pregnancy, parturition and nurturance of progeny may all be actively facilitated by people interested in one or more of these things that entire pets can do (Levinson 1974); and
- Every community includes at least a few people who maintain one or more 'part time pets' by providing either food or shelter (or both) for them. Providing for 'part time pets' in this way tends to be more of a hindrance than a help. Under such conditions, these 'stray' animals are quick to maximally exploit the resources provided and may breed accordingly.

In reviewing the 9 types of pet owners mentioned above, two broad owner categories are suggested. Firstly there are those who just don't care enough to make any serious attempt to prevent unnecessary breeding. Secondly there are those who positively get something out of breeding their pets or at least maintaining their pets in a procreative state.

With demand-linked breeding, the pet owners have at least some primary interest in the puppies and kittens produced. Their objective is to find homes, and hopefully make something on the transaction. With personality-linked breeding, on the other hand, the puppies and kittens are just a coincidental extra that goes with the maintenance of the sexually capable pets.

The following comments made by Boris Levinson at the 1974 Conference on the Ecology of the Surplus Dog and Cat Problem in Chicago had a prophetic quality which continues to be ignored:

- *Those of us who are concerned with the problem of reducing the excess animal population in this country must be aware of the very complex feelings which human beings invest in the animals they have chosen to live with them.*
- *What appears as an incomprehensible refusal on some owners' part to be reasonable about the animals they claim to be so fond of may actually be very understandable in terms of deep psychological needs.*
- *We should be able to reduce the number by a better understanding of the many facets of the problem.*

Subsidised neuter schemes can never be seriously considered to contribute anything to 'a better understanding of the problem'.

## **LOCAL RESEARCH**

In order to help put things in perspective, dog population research in Townsville (Murray 1991) indicated that 62% of female dogs had been desexed (Figure 1) and that a large majority of breeding had been done by a small minority of female dogs (Figure 2).

Sixty six percent of owners of previously owned dogs in Townsville who had allowed their female dog to breed had done so primarily because they wanted to produce puppies. These people were actively interested in realising the procreative capacity of their pets. The rest of the sample included 10% of respondents who proffered no real reason for breeding and a further 24% who thought breeding was necessary for the well being of their dog. This 34% of 'casual' breeders appear to represent an important target in the struggle to reduce casual pet breeding - a target that receives little attention at present.

When owners of currently owned breeding female dogs in the Townsville study were asked why they had not prevented their dogs from breeding, none responded that the cost of desexing was a reason (Figure 3). This result was similar to that obtained from a survey in Oregon (Rowan 1987) where cost was mentioned as a factor by only 5% of people who owned unsterilised animals. This result tends to support the notion that the effect of subsidised neutering on overall pet population breeding is likely to be of little importance. Cost of desexing is not a primary issue.

- Figure 1: An analysis of the gender and sexual entirety of 269 dogs currently owned by survey respondents in the 1986 Townsville household survey (Murray 1991).
- Figure 2: A review of the reproductive performance of 151 female dogs previously owned by survey respondents in the 1986 Townsville household survey (Murray 1991).
- Figure 3: An analysis of the reasons volunteered by survey respondents in the 1986 Townsville household survey for breeding female dogs (n=29) (Murray 1991).

Figure 1

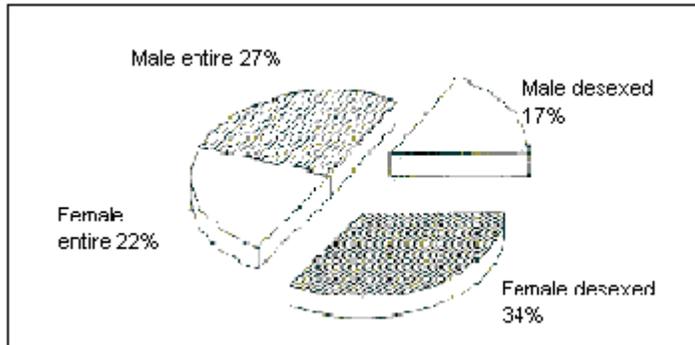


Figure 2

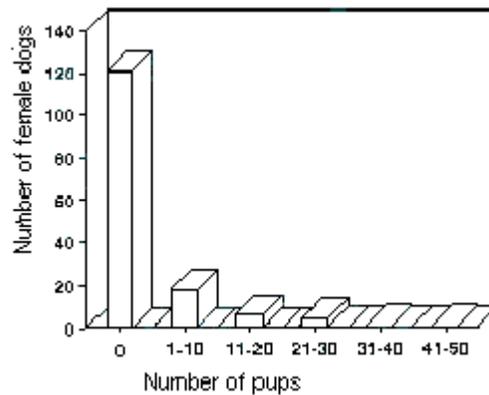
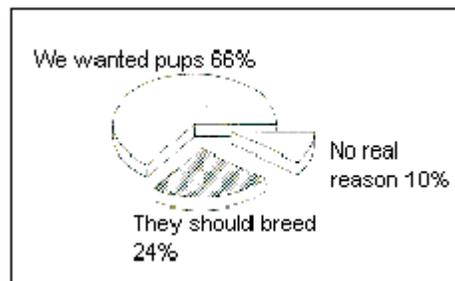


Figure 3



## EUTHANASIA STATISTICS

National pet populations in the millions will inevitably produce hundreds of thousands of aged, debilitated and incompatible pets annually. This attrition is clearly not a product of either pet 'over-supply' or 'over-demand' although unqualified euthanasia statistics may be interpreted as such.

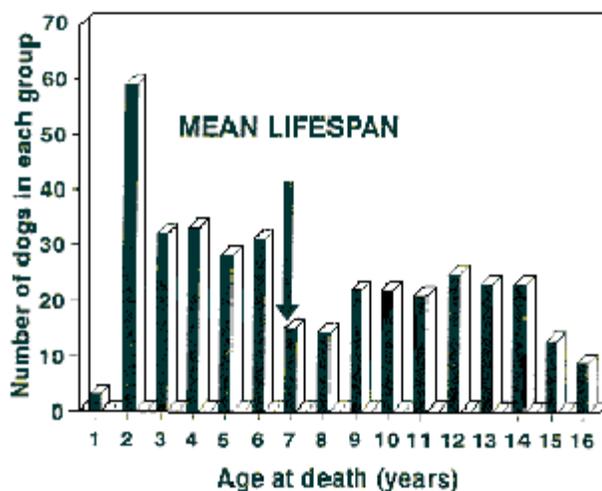
The mean lifespan of dogs previously owned by respondents in Townsville (Murray 1991) was  $8.0 \pm 4.4$  years (Figure 4). Townsville City had, at that time, an estimated dog population of 13,000. If zero dog population growth was being maintained, some 1,600 dogs (14.3% of the population) were being replaced each year. Pet populations, like all other animal populations, are constantly being replaced.

Variation in the rate of population turnover is in large part a function of community attitude to pet care. Lower mean pet longevity in an uncaring community creates quicker population turnover and higher replacement demand.

Under circumstances where pet attrition through neglect and abandonment is apparent, introduction of non-breeding units is unlikely to remedy this situation. Neutered pets would be abandoned also. The rapid turnover of pets in a careless 'society is a cycle driven by pet owner attitude more than by pet breeding ability. Even if enough de sexed units (sufficient to temporarily achieve zero pet population growth) could be forcibly introduced into such a general pet community the same argument would apply. The effect would still only be temporary .

Figure 4: Age distribution chart showing the age at time of death of 373 dogs previously owned by survey respondents in the 1986 Townsville household survey (ages shown here have been taken to the end of the year in each case). Mean lifespan =  $8.0 \pm 4.4$  years

Figure 4



## CULTURAL CHANGES

When I was going to primary school at the end of the 1950's, there always seemed to be someone in the immediate neighbourhood who had a new litter of puppies or kittens to show their friends. Families who didn't actually have breeding pets were almost exceptional! Breeding pets were part of our way of life in those days. But, the pet attrition rate was exceptionally high also.

An average childhood one or two generations ago might normally encompass the consecutive life spans of five or more separate pets. Mean pet longevity was probably less than 2 years at that time. Viral epidemics like Canine Distemper and Feline Panleucopaenia, endemic disease such as intestinal parasitism and heartworms, traumatic vehicle injury and all manner of other misadventure took a very heavy toll indeed. Pets that were considered to be in excess of demand were killed at birth - this was considered normal procedure.

In those days (not all that long ago), I guess the grim reaper took at least 50% of the entire pet population each year. Population turnover was very high and replacement through breeding reflected this state of affairs. Breeding pets were part of suburban family culture.

There have been enormous advances in the science and application of pet health over recent decades - times have changed. Epidemic and endemic diseases are under control. Pets are much less likely to roam, be run over or simply go missing. Pet longevity has increased greatly over the past two or three decades. Public attitude about pet breeding have been slower to change. The 'just one litter' mentality that we still so commonly see, may be a sign of the slowness of this change of suburban culture.

## URBAN ANIMAL MANAGEMENT

Dog control by-laws appear in much the same form where ever people keep dogs in urban communities. These by-laws are, in effect, enforceable codes of responsible dog ownership. They are designed to prevent community dog problems (including indiscriminate breeding) being caused by irresponsible ownership. It is for good reason that virtually all councils have by-laws pertaining to dog registration and dog restraint.

Beck (1983) observed that efforts to control excessive breeding by using concessional registration fees for neutered dogs was a sound concept because some owners need a little encouragement to realise their potential to be responsible. Beck also pointed out, however, that this kind of incentive could obviously never be successful unless dog registrations were properly enforced in the first place. Despite the fact that this conclusion seems self evident, dog registration levels across Australia are at present not impressive.

In Victoria only 67.5% of dogs were registered and only 50% were desexed (Tribe 1985). In South Australia, a more recent report (McCann 1992) placed the level of non- registration at between 20% and 30%. There is no reason to expect the situation is any better in other states. The acceptance by Local Government of such poor levels of owner compliance with registration by-laws obviously precludes a useful desexing incentive effect from a registration fee differential.

Over the past 30 years or more, the importance of leash, fencing and general dog restraint by-laws has been mentioned by most authors on the subject of good urban animal management. Properly restrained dogs are effectively prevented from all manner of misadventure as well as from breeding indiscriminately. Despite this, roaming dogs in most communities are still commonplace.

Most of the dogs handled by local government pounds in Victoria (Tribe 1985) were unregistered, most were undesexed and most were unclaimed. In the USA, Olson *et al.* (1986) noted that a high proportion (about 10%) of surrendered and impounded female pets were also pregnant. This 'unwanted pet' profile is, more importantly (in an aetiological sense), an 'irresponsible owner' profile. As Arkow (1991) notes, there is clearly a significant population of pet owners in the community who fail to keep up their part of the 'pet-bond' bargain.

Urban animal management serves a whole range of important purposes not least of which is improving the welfare of pet animals. Upton (1992) noted how progressive and resolute municipal urban animal management can improve pet owner responsibility. Upton also noted how, despite this, when animal control becomes an issue of public concern, priority often goes to building new or bigger animal shelters at the expense of better methods of urban animal management. Treating the symptom takes precedence over understanding and then treating the cause.

It has been proven (Moulton *et al.* 1991) that penalties for breach of Local Government animal control ordinances, if strictly enforced, can dramatically reduce casual ownership.

They reported how the Atlanta Humane Society recorded a reduction in the number of cats and dogs coming into their shelter from 50,000 to 25,000 per annum meaningful penalties. A 50% reduction in the numbers of unwanted pets using this one animal control measure is just too good to ignore. Despite this, such standards of urban animal management which involve nothing more than properly enforcing existing animal control laws, are most unusual in Australia today. It remains a mystery why this is so.

## **VETERINARY CRITICISM**

Veterinarians may be criticised on the grounds that high veterinary fees for de sexing procedures have compounded the unwanted pet problem. It is often suggested that ordinary pet owners cannot afford surgical desexing services.

The failure of desexing voucher discount schemes to effectively improve pet desexing rates, suggests that any fee (even when significantly reduced) will still be too much for the sort of people who rate pet desexing as a low priority. The notion that lower veterinary fees will help solve the unwanted pet problem is indicative of an oversimplified and misdirected appreciation of what is involved.

There is no evidence to suggest that pet owners are exploited by veterinarians charging excessively for surgical desexing procedures. Veterinary clinical and surgical services are provided in a competitive, free enterprise business environment.

The veterinary profession can, however, be faulted in the business of providing pet desexing services on the grounds that veterinarians have, as a group, failed to effectively market the merit of this surgical procedure. Nor has the veterinary profession been very effective in conveying to the public an appreciation of the monetary value of the service that is involved.

It is interesting to reflect that the unrelenting pressure for reduced or below cost charges for desexing procedures has possibly discouraged veterinarians from marketing and vigorously promoting the merit and value of pet desexing.

## **PRIVATE RESPONSIBILITY**

As Marshall (1979) pointed out:

*Perhaps the largest factor contributing to overpopulation can be categorised as the uneducated and/or responsible pet owner. This is possibly a reflection on our society; which creates a larger government, a greater dependence upon it, and less individual responsibility, resulting in pets becoming another disposable product.*

According to Marshall, subsidising pet owner expenses (including subsidised desexing costs) unfortunately tends to undermine the very cornerstone of responsible pet ownership by downgrading the concept of personal obligation. People are responsible for pet problems (Searle 1979).

Anything that detracts from the essential concept of 'pet owner onus' has to be a serious retrograde step and subsidised neutering inevitably tends to do just that.

## **ANIMAL SHELTERS**

It seems inappropriate that the unpleasant job of wholesale euthanasia should be left to the staff of animal shelters. However, the fact that the lion's share of unwanted pet euthanasia falls at present to animal shelter staff may be in large part a problem of their own making. When animal shelters are advertised as agencies providing shelter and care for strays and other unwanted pets, euthanasia inevitably ends up being a fairly big part of their task.

It is most often a zero cost option for people to surrender an unwanted pet to an animal shelter. This is clearly a much more attractive disposal option for pets that are soon to be forgotten than having to pay a veterinary practice to do the job. It is no surprise under these circumstances that unwanted pets are taken to animal shelters.

The option of taking a pet to an animal shelter becomes even more attractive if there is an expectation that surrendered pets are likely to find a new and happy home almost as soon as they are handed over. Such naive and unrealistic expectations are not unreasonable when, as Arluke (1991) noted, even people who actually apply for work at animal shelters are sometimes shocked when they find that euthanasia takes place there.

The animal shelter 'safety net' for unwanted pets may paradoxically act as a positive contributing cause of pet owner carelessness. Animal sheltering is a business that tends to create its own demand. It has been suggested that because of this, where ever you build an animal shelter, it will quickly be filled with discarded pets. By actively promoting their role as pet rehoming agencies, are animal shelters possibly encouraging the kind of pet owner carelessness that leads to a steady supply of unwanted?

## RESEARCH

Even though the plight of surrendered and abandoned companion animals in Australia has been a cause of considerable public disquiet for decades, there is little published information on the statistical magnitude or the real cause of this problem. Rowan (1991) made a similar observation on the situation in North America: 'considering the amount of time, effort and money spent to control pet populations, it was, to say the least, surprising that so little evaluation had been done'.

Pet euthanasia statistics derived from pounds, animal shelters and veterinary practices tend only to be unqualified estimates. The numbers *per se* (when hard data is available) of unwanted pets give no indication of the underlying reasons that relate to these statistics. Also, the numbers alone give no perspective or measure of the human side of wholesale euthanasia (Arluke 1991).

It is something of an indictment of animal shelter management that so little detailed information about unwanted pets and the people who surrender them has been gathered, analysed and published. Without reliable baseline data, better population management methods cannot be evaluated and new models cannot be devised (Rowan 1991). Unqualified euthanasia statistics do not reflect specific levels of pet owner responsibility or pet breeding rates. Expenditure on *ad hoc* remedies for ill-defined problems can never be a substitute for orderly and rational management.

Computer software designed for data filing and epidemiological analysis is available 'off the shelf today. Personal computers are easily capable of handling data for even the biggest of shelters. The data is there just waiting to be accessed and analysed (Upton 1992). Unfortunately, animal shelter management presently gives little priority to such research.

There seems, in the past, to have been more interest in coping with the problem than in trying to prevent it.

One wonders, inevitably, if coping has been the preferred option.

## SUMMARY

Some extracts from the comments by Hoyt (1974) in the Introduction may help to summarise the material presented above.

### a) *We are sick and tired of being called murderers*

Persons espousing a dedication to the care of neglected animals are likely to be disturbed by being labelled 'animal murderers'. When responsibility for this euthanasia seems to be forced onto animal shelter staff by the very public that seem to be applying this offensive label, the hurt is likely to be compounded. Under these circumstances it is not hard to see how animal shelter personnel might develop a feeling of bitterness and hostility towards the community they serve.

My feeling is that the community at large does not in fact see animal shelter personnel as murderers. My experience is that the very few people who are aware of this problem would simply prefer to turn a blind eye. If animal shelter personnel are prepared to tidy up this mess, they are, if anything, grateful.

If I am correct, then the label 'murderer' is self applied by animal shelter personnel who have difficulty coping with the reality of their role as disposal service for careless pet owners. The label is I think more a reflection of how animal shelter workers see themselves than how others see them.

b) *Can you blame us for seeking a more positive approach?*

The answer has to be 'No'. Killing discarded but otherwise healthy pet animals is a dreadful thing to have to do. I've been there - I've done that - it really is a bad business. The plight of discarded pets is a disgusting statement about the integrity of so many members of our society .

c) *Surely there must be a better way. a more positive way. a more humane way?*

The answer has to be 'Yes! But there are no magic wand remedies.

d) The next question then is: *If the answer is not subsidised neutering, then what is it?*

There are three issues that positively cry out for immediate attention.

Firstly, the knowledge gap has to be bridged. Problems can never be solved until they are properly understood. The focus needs to be on the erstwhile owners of unwanted pets. The medium for understanding is more one of human behavioural science rather than of veterinary science. Pet factors are obviously important but people factors more so. It is encouraging to see (Kahler 1992) respected behaviourists such as Olson, Bonnett, Glickman and Moulton enthusiastically promoting research as an urgent priority in the search for ways of better pet population management. Adequate fiscal resources for quality research in this field can be made available by redirecting some of the funds currently being unproductively invested in subsidised neutering schemes.

Secondly, there is both factual and anecdotal evidence to indicate that major benefits in animal welfare can flow from dedicated efforts to improve general standards of Urban Animal Management at the Local Government level. The benefits of enforced dog registration programs in reducing the numbers of unwanted and abandoned dogs as described by Moulton *et al.* (1991) seem remarkable. It is unfortunate that urban animal management has (generally speaking) not yet progressed much past the most elementary stage of catching and impounding strays. Most important aspects of serious urban animal management including public awareness of pet problems and pet owner education are as yet ineffectual.

Thirdly, the problem of unwanted pets is of paramount concern to people involved with animal shelter management. The effort invested over decades past in voucher schemes, shelter neutering and spay clinics bear testimony to this fact. However, it is doubtful whether the general public see the unwanted pet problem as any kind of issue at all! Animal shelter managers are understandably reluctant to make a big public issue of their role in euthanasing so many abandoned pets. Mass euthanasia is hardly an ideal subject for animal shelter image promotion. However, some way of graphically getting this most unpalatable aspect of the animal shelter story into the public arena has to be found.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Dick Murray is well known for his contribution to Urban Animal Management, particularly as a consultant and as the Editor of the proceedings of the first national conference on Urban Animal Management held in Brisbane in 1992. He is an antagonist of 'learned helplessness' about integrating pets into society, and has the following comments to make.

There is no doubt that pet ownership is a very important quality of life issue in Australian communities. Boon or blight - the impact of pets is significant. Boon or blight - it all depends on the competence and commitment of *responsible pet owning citizens*.

The day to day work of a veterinarian like myself, practice in the area of companion animal care is basically about providing services for *responsible pet owning citizens who are considerate of their pets*. Though demanding, I personally find this work rewarding. It seems an inherently good thing to be able to help people fulfil their part of the 'pet-owner' bond of companionship.

The day to day work of Animal Control Officers in Local Government is also about enhancing pet benefit. The difference is that with Urban Animal Management we are talking about pet benefit in a community rather than an individual sense. We are talking about providing services for *responsible pet owning citizens who are considerate of their neighbours*.

The former service tries to guarantee *pet care* while the latter tries to guarantee *pet access*. I am as interested in Urban Animal Management as I am in Companion Animal Practice. Both are important. I think it is true to say that if Urban Animal Management cannot improve and ensure community pet tolerance into the future, pet access will be the casualty. I don't think any of us want that.

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