

Animal welfare shelter role in the supply of pets to the community

Peter Barber

I can talk about the routine conduct of a shelter, but I've written a book which documents all the procedures and protocols followed by RSPCA Victoria.

This will provide A-Z of shelter management but perhaps we should ask why we need the RSPCA, other shelters and Council pounds and what should these establishments be providing in terms of accessibility and visibility to the public.

Certainly, the most important and immediate roles of shelters are those of providing sanctuary to lost, dumped, frightened and injured animals and to reunite those animals with their owners. To ensure maximum reunification people looking for lost pets must be encouraged to visit the shelter to look and see for themselves as it is amazing how a white and tan Fox Terrier over the phone becomes a black tan and white Kelpie/Healer cross, face to face.

But let's look at the problem from both ends rather than the middle because these are the major areas, both causal and of renaissance.

Why do we have nearly 118,000 stray/lost/abandoned dogs and cats received into RSPCA shelters in Australia each year. Why is the number of reclaimed pets so small? Only 15,300 dogs and 1,600 cats were reclaimed in 1999/2000 leaving over 100,000 dogs and cats for the RSPCA to cope with one way or the other?

I expect the answers are several:

- it is too easy to acquire dogs and cats, ie. it is a right to own one or more and perhaps it should be a privilege;
- it is too easy to give dogs and cats as presents and often to people who don't want them or have little capacity to look after them properly; and
- it is too easy to get rid of them, ie. open the gate, dump them, hand them in and it is cheaper to buy another one than to pay for vaccination, registration and Council fines if you reclaim a pet.

Whilst recognising that some of the cat numbers come from trapped wild colonies, we must acknowledge that the extravagant throwaway or ignorance-is-bliss attitudes of many in our community are the main contributors to these horrific numbers and hideous costs that we have to endure to look after the cast-offs. Bear in mind that the RSPCA is a charity providing its shelter services at public demand allowing government and local government in many cases to avoid their responsibilities.

It is important for those with some stake in the outcome to cause our State and Territory Governments to become part of the problem solving. We must engage our animal welfare advisory committees, our relevant Ministers and even our loyal oppositions in the debate and in reaching conclusions and solutions. We must have adequate pet animal management laws which also require determined efforts to return lost pets to their owners.

First, I believe everyone seeking to buy a pet dog or cat should be required to complete a simple questionnaire answering such questions as:

- Who will be responsible for the dog/cat?
- Is the house fenced and escape proof or do you have a cat park/aviary?
- In which municipality do you live?
- What do cats/dogs eat?
- Do they need exercise, water, shelter and if so, what sort of management will you provide and so on.

Second, all pet dogs and cats should be desexed before going to new owners.

Third, all pet dogs and cats should be microchipped before going to new owners.

Fourth, all pet dogs and cats should be vaccinated, temperament tested, breed tested (no APBT + other banned breeds should be on-sold) and Council registration should be empowered to add to a list of dogs not to be on-sold due to their aggression.

Fifth, all pet owners should be required by law to notify change of address to old and new Councils with pet details.

Sixth, seventh and eighth, you can fill in the gaps but you will appreciate my drift which is that there must be a significantly improved control and management system for pet animals and pet animal ownership, none of which is too onerous if we are responsible. I'm sure most of you here today who own dogs or cats can complete the above checklist satisfactorily – adequate escape proof facilities, vaccination, desexing, microchipping, registration and so on.

It is absurd to believe that only the RSPCA should apply the above criteria to pet ownership. This is where government and local government must come to the party by requiring every outlet – pet shop, breeder, pound, shelter, backyarder – to meet those same standards. We are reliant upon government setting these standards via comprehensive Codes of Practice.

Only then will we see a more balanced and responsible pet animal ownership pattern established. Certainly, dogs and cats will still escape but they will be microchipped and the number of animals reunited with their owners will increase dramatically. There will be some who don't want them back – okay but they will have to pay a surrender fee thus alleviating the high cost of maintenance pre-rehousing.

We have reduced the number of dogs and cats entering our shelter or at least we've been able to return many more to their owners but we still have thousands remaining.

Let's be quite frank about the reality of running a pound or a shelter. There will be surplus animals which have no future and which must be killed.

Wild, diseased, seriously injured cats, savage, uncontrollable, diseased and seriously injured dogs will be humanely euthanased by veterinarians. There is no such thing as a *no kill* shelter *unless* someone else does all your killing for you and that's a cop out, and is deceitful.

As an aside I visited the San Francisco SPCA *no kill shelter*. I was mightily impressed with the wonderful facilities, the socialisation program and rehousing statistics. The fact is they still killed a few animals but their statistics were outstanding but how was this achieved? Simply by not accepting animals that had no obvious chance of being rehoused, by selecting only the best animals from the city pound, by diverting the basket cases to the city pound and by allowing the massive and necessary euthanasia of surplus and un-salvageable animals to be carried out by the city pound. Failed adoptions were also sent on to the city pound.

The *no kill* label is a great PR message and has huge fundraising potential but it is, in my view, dishonest as it is unattainable.

The fact is that many dogs and cats will be euthanased for all the reasons we have mentioned, including the one of oversupply. The public can only absorb so many and it is cruel in the RSPCA view to keep dogs, in particular, penned for long periods. They go stir-crazy and it is pointless to pretend that they can be kept indefinitely hoping for eventual adoption.

Nothing I have said, however, precludes a major program to increase the number of shelter dogs and cats we rehome. There are things we can do better, there are innovations, there are community expectations and our own determination to rehouse more dogs and cats and to kill fewer of them.

First and foremost we must have facilities which, while they allow immediate and easy access and treatment and handling and are comfortable for the inmates, are attractive for the public. The place has to look good, it must give the impression of efficiency and care and be accessible. Image is so very important.

Do we have the name, the game and the capacity?

Second, we must allow the public into what has been a well kept secret for many years — yes, the RSPCA does have animals for sale. It has the best dogs and cats available in town in that they have all been wormed, rehabilitated, vaccinated, socialised, temperament tested (using the nationally approved and accredited testing procedure) and will be sold with a money back guarantee once they have been desexed and microchipped.

How's that? Queue up please!

Third, we now cater for whelping, weaning and fostering in an attempt to give more animals a

chance to have a happy family life and to keep the necessary mix of young and adult animals available for adoption.

Fourth, we must advertise, promote and generally push our barrow, roll up, roll up — well not exactly but we must, I repeat, draw the attention of the public to the main issues of wonderful pets being available at the RSPCA and of responsible pet ownership.

We also require the courage to be innovative. With a policy that no dog or cat will be sold unless it is desexed, we have pioneered immature desexing — a procedure still avoided by most veterinary practices for whatever reason. This removes the fiddling about trying to get puppies or kittens back at 6 months of age.

In Victoria, we have been desexing pups and kittens from the age of 8 weeks at a much reduced cost because it is a much simpler process. The animals are done first thing in the morning and released that same evening. The recovery is almost immediate, the cost significantly cheaper as the operation is less time-consuming. We have lost one puppy only in nine years of immature desexing during which time we have desexed about 10,000 puppies and 14,000 kittens.

We can also support Tony Cooke's people by supplying kittens for sale from approved veterinary clinics. Our own President has sold 50 kittens supplied by the RSPCA from his clinic under this system.

In Victoria I expect the RSPCA soon to establish pet adoption centres in major towns/cities which have no RSPCA shelter but which can be readily supplied and serviced by an RSPCA shelter. These centres will have all the necessary shelter and veterinary backup and will not receive surrender or stray animals from the public (not initially anyway) as their role is purely to see RSPCA guaranteed dogs and cats to the public. We will also transfer dogs and cats from a shelter with no present demand to one where the demand is high.

In conclusion, let me show you that what I have said is not some theoretical claptrap but can, in fact, occur. I believe that giving sanctuary to lost, stray, unwanted animals is one of the Society's major responsibilities and the community clearly agrees. Equally, however, we have to accept responsibility for the end result and by that I mean to rehouse as many of those surplus animals as is reasonably possible, and to have many more of them reclaimed by their owners.

Having emerged from a period of murk during which we performed our shelter tasks in very ordinary, shall I say Victorian facilities, I am able to prove some of the things I've been propounding.

Since building our new animal welfare centre and adoption facilities in Victoria which allowed us to advertise ourselves, conduct awareness and adoption programs and weekends, the increased reclaims and sales and reduced euthanasia rates speak for themselves and are extremely encouraging.

All up, over three years the reclaim numbers are up 29% and although still disappointingly low,

especially for cats, the trend is encouraging. Adoptions are up 45% in the three year period and euthanasia numbers are down 30%.

That to me is progress but, we still have to get better at drawing prospective owners through our doors as our guaranteed healthy and temperamentally sound dogs and cats make fantastic pets and we are proud of them. There is no room for complacency. We have to be pro-active. We must be accessible and helpful to our public.

First contact is often by the telephone, so our system and answering technique must be excellent. Our staff must be well trained but also enthusiastic about the service they give and are of the joy they provide many but be able to comfort others. Our shelter staff and public interface is of major importance and the attitude that the public is a bloody nuisance cannot be tolerated at any level as it may have once been. We have to do a major PR job and be a little lateral and prepared to introduce new systems or avenues to ensure more great pets are rehoused.

It's an expensive process but a vitally important and necessary one and must be undertaken with the view of reaching the impossible no kill goal. We can, however, keep improving and I hope I have given you a glimpse of how we can do that.

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