

Animal hoarders in Australia - shining light through dark shades

Dr Mark Lawrie, RSPCA NSW

Abstract

The Australian experience with animal hoarders has been remarkably similar to that of the United States where this condition has been more extensively reported. It is clear there is a predominance of older females involved, that there are linkages to mental health issues, high rates of recidivism, and a significant percentage of perpetrators who are involved in animal rights and rescue or welfare groups and breeder organisations (with often unrecognised facilitation of hoarders by such groups and organisations).

In recent years the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) has sort to raise awareness within the public, animal control, animal welfare and veterinary domains to increase understanding of the existence of this problem and to scrutinise strategies in dealing with animal hoarding. These strategies, their relevance to the Australian situation, and the important role of animal management officers and agencies, will be discussed.

Introduction

Unless you have worked in an animal welfare organisation, or perhaps animal management, you may have little or no knowledge of the problem of animal hoarding. This article aims to increase awareness of this problem within the community generally and animal management officer community in particular. The suffering caused by this poorly understood mental health problem is enormous but largely hidden from society. Animal hoarding is thought to have elements in common with both addictive and obsessive compulsive behavioural disorders (Frost, 2000).

Recognition of the problem is the first step in reducing its impact and getting much needed help for affected individuals. Coordinated efforts by law enforcement, mental health and social workers, legislators, animal welfare groups, animal management providers, veterinarians and the media is critical in finding effective solutions. More critically this publicises the issue so that society will develop awareness and the desire to deal effectively with the problem.

Animal hoarders are people who accumulate more animals than they can possibly care for. Research from the US would indicate that they probably exist in every community (Patronek, 1999). Animal hoarders may even be thought of as animal lovers in their local community but the reality is very different. Typically they live a reclusive life in appalling filth and squalor with an ever increasing number of grossly neglected, starving, ill and dying animals, whose most basic needs are not being met (Patronek, 2001).

The animal hoarder often comes across as very intelligent and clearly views themselves as the saviour of their animals, whilst being in complete denial and apparently unable to recognise the extreme suffering they are inflicting. The hoarder will express the view that they do their best to keep an animal alive; sometimes barely. This appears to be the overriding consideration and has resulted in numerous cases of deception of smaller, more radical animal welfare organisations who seek to avoid euthanasia of animals at all costs (Perry, 1999). Dr Patronek commented on this in emphasising that animal hoarding is not legitimate animal sheltering. He said, "I think the current system makes it easier for the animal hoarder to hide behind claims of being an animal rescuer or no-kill shelter (Kuehn, 2003). Survey data in the US showed that 24% respectively of respondent hoarders had either been associated with animal breeding or claimed to be animal rescuers (Clifton, 1999).

There is no acknowledgement by animal hoarders of the living hell to which their captives are subjected (Lagoni et al, 1994). People with this mental health problem usually live in dark airless hovels. There are usually layers of newspaper, urine and faeces, refuse and vermin throughout the dwelling, and amongst it all, rotting cannibalised carcasses of former pets are often found. Medical problems and injuries in the animals are usually left untreated or treated inappropriately by the hoarder. Animals are sometimes confined in filthy cages, boxes or cupboards indefinitely. As you read this you are probably thinking that this must be very rare but sadly it is becoming apparent that such cases are common. In the United States alone it is estimated that there are 700-2000 new cases annually (Patronek, 1999) and, whilst studies are yet to be done in Australia, anecdotally it would appear that most private veterinary practices have contact with a hoarder. The author recently surveyed an audience of around 100 animal management officers (AMOs) from around Australia and approximately 50% indicated that they had previously dealt with an animal hoarder.

Population comparisons with the US to Australia may mean that there are up to 200 new hoarders cases per year. Given that hoarders are highly recidivist it is not an exaggeration to predict that there may be thousands of active hoarders extant in Australia, contributing tens of thousands of unwanted animals to the population.

Profile

Extensive profiling of animal hoarders has been performed in the US and the following points are sourced from the definitive work of Patronek (1999).

- Any type of animal may be hoarded. Cats and dogs are the most common species.
- The number of animals hoarded varies, with between 30 and 200 being common.
- In 69% of cases animal faeces and urine accumulated in living areas, in more than 25% the hoarder's bed was soiled with faeces or urine.
- Dead or sick animals were discovered in 80% of reported cases, yet in 60% hoarders did not acknowledge the problem.
- The hoarder is
 - o More often female (76%)
 - o Middle aged to elderly (46% are 60 years or older)
 - o Usually single (more than half live alone), though couples are seen

In Australia there has been limited profiling as such. The RSPCA has been involved with a number of hoarders cases. We have confirmed many observations from the analyses that have been done elsewhere finding hoarders to be:-

- Intelligent and able to attract sympathy
- Of varied work status or even profession (eg nurses, psychologists and aged care workers)
- Secretive and socially isolated
- In denial that animals are suffering despite overwhelming evidence
- Cunning and deceptive, will often move to avoid help or prosecution and notorious for starting up again elsewhere
- Even after conviction they do not stop unless psychiatric help is obtained

The table on the next page shows a sample of some profiling that has been done at RSPCA NSW (Lawrie et al, 2004).

Table 1: Profiling of 10 Animal Hoarders taken from RSPCA NSW Inspectorate Files

| | Address | Sex | Age | Occupation | Marital Status | Cat | Dog | Bird | Rabbit | Rats | Confined/Free | Own or Rent |
|----|---------|-----|-----|--------------|----------------|-----|-----|-------|--------|------|------------------------|-------------|
| 1 | S | M | 40+ | P/T | Single | 20+ | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | Free | Rents |
| 2 | C | F | 65 | Pension | Single | 10 | 0 | 0 | | | Confined | Owner |
| 3a | B | F | 60 | Home Carer | Married to 3b | 20+ | 20 | 0 | 0 | 0 | Cats Free Dogs Cnfd | |
| 3b | B | M | 65+ | Inv Pension | Married to 3a | 20+ | 20 | 0 | 0 | 0 | Cats free Dogs cnfd | |
| 4 | R | M | 50 | Employed | Single | 0 | 0 | 200 + | 30 | 30 | Confined | Owner |
| 5 | C | F | 65 | Pension | Single | 10 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | Confined | Owner |
| 6 | Bl | M | 52 | Panel Beater | Single | 0 | 8 | 0 | 0 | 0 | Confined | Owner |
| 7 | A | F | 59 | Nurse-Aged | Single | 40+ | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 | Free | Owner |
| 8 | M | M | 70 | Pension | Single | 40+ | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | Confined/Free | Owner |
| 9 | P | F | 70+ | Pension | Separ'd | 0 | 12 | 0 | 0 | 0 | Confined | Owner |

1 State Of Animals: Cats: poor body condition to thin, 1 x severely stunted, 1 x neurological disorder, all undesexed. Kittens: ringworm, flu, ulcerated eyes. Cluttered but dry.

State Of Premises:

Reasonably clean, but has secluded, secure pens.

State Of Property:

Other Collections:

Computer parts, software, porn magazines.

Idiosyncrasies:

Into "genetic research"; denies flu cats need to be seen by vet; administers home remedies (eg human antibiotic tablets mixed with water).

Mental State:

Eccentric, Vietnam veteran. Won't answer the door.

Prior Visits:

Four at least over years, same circumstances, difficult to monitor as renting & changes addresses frequently.

NB:

No prosecution to date but has been warned.

2 State Of Animals: Generally reasonable body condition, but confined to house; stunted.

State Of Premises:

No faeces about; newspaper on floor; windows closed.

State Of Property:

Front yard okay; rear yard unknown.

Other Collections:

Unknown.

Idiosyncrasies:

Locks undesexed cats in cat carry cages for long periods of time to prevent breeding. When released cats would walk in circles.

Mental State:

Eccentric, can be violent, attacked Inspector with a cane.

Prior Visits:

None known.

NB:

No known prosecution.

3 State Of Animals: Dogs: General neglect. Some run free, some short tether, some confined in cages. Animals overcrowded. Cats: General neglect. Flu, fleas, some poor body condition, some missing an eye.

State Of Premises:

Cluttered and dark, filthy, foul stench, not maintained.

State Of Property:

Crowded small backyard.

Other Collections:

Unknown.

Idiosyncrasies:

3a will not part with any animal.

3b ill, on oxygen & will not allow entry unless 3a is at home.

Mental State:

3a suspicious, unyielding regarding animal health issues, argumentative.

Prior Visits:

Two occasions prior, same circumstances. Council intervened & were going to issue orders regarding the number of animals.

N.B:

No prosecution to date

Appears to be supplied with animals from a Sydney Council employee.

Allegedly founded an animal welfare society. Had been working with a veterinarian.

- 4 State Of Animals: Many deceased & numerous in poor body condition. Overcrowded, rodents in with birds, birds in terrified state.
State Of Premises: Pure filth, bird faeces & old seed/husks piled up, rodents prolific, overcrowded, confined
State Of Property: Cluttered with furniture, paper, boxes & items.
Other Collections: Video porn; all rooms congested with boxes/paper.
Idiosyncrasies: Strange set up as many of the birds are valuable - eg one pair worth \$26,000 & insured to that value, one room remained clean, and had no furniture in it
Mental State: Quiet, pleasant, helpful & obliging - no noticeable problem - said parents deceased & left him their birds which he had to put with his.
(If this is true then must have occurred some time ago taking into consideration the state of the premises/animals).
Prior Visits: None known.
NB: No prosecution to date as limited prosecutable offences & cooperation of 4, surrendered many animals & improved conditions – revisit required
- 5 State Of Animals: Reasonable body condition, but unkempt, fleas, some sickly with flu.
State Of Premises: Cluttered, kitchen unusable, bedrooms full of boxes & items - stench overpowering.
State Of Property: Overgrown.
Other Collections: Unknown except for boxes/clutter.
Idiosyncrasies: Won't answer door, evasive; feeds the cats large lumps of horse meat in kitty litter trays; no open windows.
Mental State: Intelligent but threatening & uncooperative.
- 6 State Of Animals: Poor body condition, depressed, timid & cowering, most aggressive, dirty, fleas, some ulcers or callouses on hindquarters, callouses on boney points
State Of Premises: All rooms full of clutter boxes, magazines & items - goat track through house - faeces compacted in cages where dogs held
State Of Property: Overgrown yards.
Other Collections: Porn magazines, books on dog breeds & dog psychology/behaviour, show ribbons, plastic chicken crates, knives.
Idiosyncrasies: House had manchester, stove, vanity unit, etc still in original packaging of years prior - studying "genetics" through dogs for cancer research. Has numerous books/VHS tapes about many dog breeds. Goes into great detail when explaining anything.
Mental State: Intelligent, hung-up on supposed death of fiance 5 yrs prior in hit/run accident; noted anti depressant medication at house; several racks of knives on kitchen wall.
NB: Convicted in relation to confinement, vet treatment & food charges;
Magistrate very sympathetic toward Defendant. Difficulty in being awarded costs
Prior Visits: Yes, in 1997 (notification on wall inside) - limited investigation by officer at time.
- 7 State Of Animals: Very poor body condition to poor body condition, fleas, some FIV positive, some deceased cats & decomposed animals inside house, flu kittens, cats/kittens with ruptured eyes
State Of Premises: Putrid, deep in faeces, urine & animal hair, house dark, odour intense, difficult to breathe, curtains drawn, clutter, power cords under faeces/urine.
State Of Property: Very overgrown & cluttered- house fortified with ornaments, plants, junk, gates & loud, aggressive dogs.
Other Collections: Videos, LP record collection, DVDs, crockery ornaments, heaps of clothing.
Idiosyncrasies: A lot of food products out of date, no water to premises, electrical faults. Stated she only had eight cats.
Mental State: Diagnosed paranoid schizophrenic, pleasant, on many visits uncooperative, used dogs to prevent officers entering.
Suicide note found - "throw myself under a bus".
Prior Visits: Several since 2000 (from 1999).
NB: None to date - had success in having property cleaned by Forensic Cleaners (cost to 7 \$29,000) & incl. building repairs, plumbing & electrical repairs - surrendered all except 5 cats, to be desexed & treated before returning.
Always has cooked food in pots on small portable cooktop or in frypan on floor, this food not refrigerated, cats & dogs don't touch it. 7 is reasonable in appearance and attire - when asked how many cats she had she stated she had eight.

Warning signs (especially for veterinarians) for identification of animal hoarders

(Sourced from article in the *Keystone Veterinarian*, Sept/Oct 2001 issue by Anne Irwin, Executive Director, Bucks County SPCA, and President, Federated Humane Societies of Pennsylvania)⁷

- Long list of pets, most only seen once
- Usually not presented for routine preventative medicine, and desexing is rare except in some cases linked to animal welfare organisations
- Evasive when asked how many pets owned, don't know or won't say
- Often presented late in course of illness
- May seek heroic and futile care for animals they claim to have recently found
- Animals may be bathed or perfumed prior to visit to conceal odour
- May bring in a relatively presentable pet but seek medication for more seriously ill animals at home
- Claim to have found or rescued an animal which appears to have been confined in filthy conditions (eg strong urine odour, overgrown claws, muscle atrophy)
- Interest in rescuing more animals including checking notice boards and questioning other clients.

Consequences of animal hoarding

Animal Welfare

Animal hoarding results in extreme suffering, affecting large numbers of animals for prolonged periods. The extent of abuse, neglect and social deprivation is such that euthanasia is often the only practical option for many of the animals rescued from these situations.

Public health risks

Dwellings are usually unfit for human or animal habitation, basic sanitation is lacking and utilities such as plumbing and electricity are often inoperative; fear of discovery prevents the hoarder from seeking repairs. Accumulation of excrement results in toxic levels of ammonia which is irritant to the respiratory tract. A non-acclimated person will find the air intolerable, and breathing apparatus may be required. The dwellings of hoarders generally pose increased risks to their local community from fire hazards and zoonotic disease. Rodent and insect infestations and odours create problems for neighbours.

Abuse of dependents

In recent years a clear link has been established between animal and human abuse (Ascione and Barnard, 1998). Hoarders are often negligent care takers of other family members such as minor children, dependent elders or disabled adults. There is also often significant self neglect.

Testimony

On visiting his first animal hoarding situation, veterinarian and animal behaviourist Dr Robert Stabler wrote:

"This is the most disturbing situation I have ever seen in my entire life. It has played on my mind ever since. Animals were exposed to disease and general hygiene was non-existent. The 'stench' still permeates the clothes I wore that day and Occupational Health and Safety Inspectors would immediately condemn the situation if it were a workplace let alone a residence! Animal welfare was severely compromised and had it been an animal research or a zoo situation the facility would be banned from animal research or display for life!

Any community member visiting this house would be appalled at the state in which these animals were living and would not accept this as the normal standard of animal care in current Australian society and culture. This situation represents an unacceptable community health risk and fire hazard. The potential for transmission of disease from animals to people (zoonosis) is high. The neighbourhood community has the right to expect other community members will deal responsibly with their animals and maintain a level of hygiene expected by the general community."

Prevention

Education of both the public and animal management and care workers about this condition is essential to facilitate early intervention and to prevent people from inadvertently "enabling" the hoarder. Hoarders will commonly receive animals from local people who know that the hoarder will always take one more. Hoarders may even obtain animals from vets or pounds that are often desperate to re-home animals and have no idea of the situation to which they are sending them. There is often misguided public sympathy and support for hoarders who are perceived as animal lovers and portrayed as such in the media. Their proclaimed good intentions cannot be allowed to divert attention from the terrible suffering they are causing. We need to be quite clear on the fact that these people are serial animal abusers.

AMOs are in the front line in dealing with the vast range of issue that animals' presence in our communities create. As indicated previously, significant numbers of AMOs have experienced animal hoarding first hand. They are more likely to be exposed to animal hoarders than veterinarians given their surveillance role in the community of their areas of control. They are the animal management eyes and ears of the community. It is important that consideration is given by Council's as to the role that AMOs and council animal control services play in animal hoarding. A multidisciplinary approach is critical in dealing with this significant societal problem for animals and people.

Veterinarians may be one of the hoarder's few human contacts and as such may also be ideally placed to detect and influence a hoarding situation. There is information from the US as to how veterinarians might deal with the situation (Kuehn, 2002). Attempts could be made to gain the hoarder's trust and learn more about the situation. The state of the animals and their conditions will determine whether a conservative approach is appropriate. Current legislation is sadly inadequate where dealing with hoarders and is in need of change. Where a hoarder will not willingly part with their animals, welfare organisations and councils are hampered by laws that impose lengthy and costly due process.

Legislation and management

As is starting to happen in the United States, legislation is required that:

- defines an animal hoarder
- emphasises that the hoarder does not recognise the problem
- increases the penalty for animal hoarding
- prescribes psychiatric help for offenders

There is also a need for provision within the law to place the burden of cost for rescue and care onto the hoarder where it belongs. In many cases if they could be compelled to immediately pay costs they would be more inclined to relinquish ownership and avoid protracted and frustrating legal battles.

At RSPCA NSW it has been found that sometimes voluntary compliance can be achieved through negotiation where an owner is reasonable and acknowledges that they are overwhelmed. They may accept reduction in numbers and agree to keep just a small number, five or six, desexed animals.

However, follow up studies are needed to gauge the success of this strategy and optimism is probably misplaced, as the American experience indicates recidivism approaching 100%. It does however allow us to deal with some situations in a much less costly manner.

In many circumstances there are adequate powers for Councils to pass specific local orders to limit the number of animals that individual rate payers possess. Consideration should be given by AMOs to lobby their respective Councils to promote this potential management tool by local government.

Animal hoarding results in enormous financial burden to animal welfare organisations, local government and communities. Even with the cooperation of the hoarder, rescue operations, veterinary care, and housing of animals can run into many thousands of dollars. To make matters worse hoarders will often fight through the courts to keep their animals; in these cases costs are tens of thousands of dollars for ongoing animal care and housing and litigation. It is rare that these costs are ever fully recovered. Nevertheless, there has been a promising trend in NSW in the last 12 months. Magistrates have been awarding the RSPCA a higher percentage of the costs being claimed

Psychiatric assessment

It is very important that a multi-agency approach is taken in dealing with animal hoarding.

It is useful to engage human health professionals to keep abreast of developments in models of understanding hoarding and the strategies that are used for managing squalor. Dr Viktoria Sunderkoff, a psychiatrist working for the Central Sydney Area Health Service, has assisted RSPCA NSW in this regard, visiting specific cases and advising strategies in dealing with individuals. She is performing a de-identified survey of the experience of inspectors from the RSPCA with animal hoarders and has stressed the advantage of having one main animal welfare organisation which manages such cases. Of critical importance is the need to have psychiatric assessment done at an early stage in the management of hoarding cases. If hoarders themselves are willing to accept assistance from a mental health crisis team this can expedite the management of the situation. It is reasonable for officers to engage professional assistance, even where this is not accepted voluntarily by the hoarder, to assess the mental health status of individuals involved in animal hoarding. This is done by contacting the local area health service provider to assess the situation.

Dr Sunderkoff recently reviewed current thinking on hoarding and has indicated that hoarding is a diagnostic criterion for many different psychiatric disorders. Hoarding has been found to occur in obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) patients and it has been hypothesised that hoarding is a variant of OCD cases but this is simplistic. The hoarding of inanimate, and sometimes animate, objects has been observed in many other psychiatric disorders, such as dementia, anorexia, psychotic disorders, depression, organic psychiatric disorders and personality disorders.

Jeffries (2005) discusses compulsive hoarding and distinguishes it from collecting which rarely leads to distress or dysfunction and which does not lead to the behaviour being undertaken secretly. Hoarders lose ability to differentiate between collecting for sentimentality, monetary or intrinsic reasons. They acquire a greater number of items upon which they place significant value. The items that are commonly hoarded by compulsive hoarders include magazines, old clothes, receipts, food items (wrappers), mechanical parts, school papers, junk mail, notes or lists, food, books, containers and toiletries.

RSPCA Australia provides a grant for animal welfare related research projects. The recipient of the Alan White Scholarship for 2004-5 was Shuron Billman, whose project is "Characterising the

psychological underpinnings of animal hoarders: a Central Queensland study." Results will be available from this work in early 2006.

Conclusion

The issue of animal hoarders has been examined extensively in the US. There is a wealth of information that is particularly useful to the understanding of, and approach to the problem that is applicable to Australia. The Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium (HARC) is an invaluable source of information. It produces useful publications and is helping to coordinate pathways forward in the US (Patronek, 2000) The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) has excellent and comprehensive material (HSUS, 2005). A whole issue of their magazine Animal Sheltering was dedicated to the issue of Hoarders in 2004 and was also dealt with in the publication, "Creating Safer Communities for Older Adults and Companion Animals" (2003).

There is a need for the issue of animal hoarders to be addressed in Australia. Further analysis, which is now underway, is required of the local situation. Above all the community needs to be informed by highlighting the issue through the various stakeholder groups, such as animal management officers and veterinarians, that are affected by this problem.

To deal with animal hoarders in Australia the following are important.

- Continued efforts are made to publicise the issue
- Research be conducted to gain information about the Australian situation
- There is increased collaboration between different agencies such as human health and mental health services, animal welfare and local government
- Legislation is amended to assist in dealing with animal hoarders
- Local government orders are enacted to help deal with animal hoarders
- The cost of dealing with hoarders is legally directed to the hoarders themselves
- Psychiatric assessment is utilised early and becomes a mandatory part of dealing with hoarders
- Infrastructure is established to monitor convicted hoarders

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