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Unwanted companion animals (UCA) and principles to reduce euthanasia of dogs and cats in different communities

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The euthanasia of dogs and cats has become an issue that has attracted significant media and government attention in recent years in a number of countries. It has been a potent driving force for those calling for Animal Control legislation though often strategies called for have little evidence base, running the risk of being not only ineffective but distractive of achieving the purpose of reduction.

Originally considered a means of controlling populations of straying animals in many countries, there is now considerable pressure to minimize the numbers of animals being euthanased. Although, there is still strong justification to continue killing those animals that are suffering significant disease or those that endanger human life, even this is under intense scrutiny.

Different countries and different communities within countries, have different circumstances. Different approaches are required in different places. There have been a lot of innovative strategies that have been developed and implemented in Australia and much progress has been made. Several measures indicate improvement especially with dogs, although there is still a tendency to highlight negatives rather than success.

The paper will present a policy framework to deal with the issue of unwanted companion animals (UCA). This framework, which has been endorsed by the Australian Veterinary Association, can be used as a generic underpinning to deal with UCA. Some strategies, such as trap, neuter, return, mobile veterinary clinics and non-surgical sterilization are examined and the application to different situations is discussed. Consideration is also given to how the issue is handled in the media, internationally and in individual countries.

UCA is particularly of interest to those working in Local Government as they are the ones primarily tasked with the legislation generated. It is critical that legislation is useful and productive and that current legislation is enforced, where appropriate, in effective ways.

The need for research

There continues to be focus on the issue of UCA, which can be defined as dogs and cats being euthanased in pounds and shelters. Although strategies have been identified to reduce the numbers of animals entering pounds and shelters, and techniques to increase the numbers that leave, there has been limited evidence-based assessment of what strategies work best.

A thorough understanding of pet population dynamics helps to understand UCA. Consideration should be given to the concept of zero population growth; a hypothesised rate of desexing of female dogs or cats that will lead to a static population (Nassar and Mosier, 1980; Nassar et al, 1984; Nassar and Fluke, 1991; Patronek et al, 1995; Patronek and Rowan, 1995; Patronek et al, 1997; Scarlett, 2004).

A quote from the discussion paper from the Queensland Department of Primary Industries that accompanied the invitation to comment on how to manage unwanted companion animals is poignant. "There is a lack of research into the most effective means of managing unwanted cats and dogs. Overall, there appears to be a lack of a coordinated and targeted approach to managing unwanted cats and dogs. We need to look at ways of improving our approach to achieve a real reduction in the number of cats and dogs being euthanased each year." (QLD DPI, 2007)

It is good that there has been more research about UCA over the last decade in Australia. There is nevertheless, minimal funding for research for small animals in Australia and indeed worldwide. The vast bulk of animal research, including animal welfare research, is done on production animals, usually funded by industry or producer levies. Even wildlife attracts more research funding than small animals. There is a role to play for animal welfare organizations in being a funding source for animal welfare research. One of the difficulties with this is that animal welfare organizations are very political and can pressure researchers in an effort to obtain results that fit with their policy of the moment.

Things are getting better

It is clear there has been significant progress in the management of stray dogs, and to a lesser degree, stray cats, in Australia over the last 30 years. There has been a huge reduction in the number of dogs straying on streets. This has resulted in reductions of traumatic orthopedic conditions being seen in veterinary practice over this time.

Confirming declining trends statistically has been problematic as there has been poor collection of data relating to stray animals, including euthanasia rates. Nevertheless, Australia has more accurate statistics than most other countries. There has been much estimation of pound and shelter statistics in all countries including Australia and much spin. It is possible that numbers have been exaggerated or at very least fed to media and the public in formats to shock. This is thought to draw attention to the issue or support for various philosophies or causes eg encouraging purchase of pound animals or raise funds.

The author has previously discussed how dealing with UCA in the USA has been hampered by the lack of accurate statistics (Lawrie, 2006). The paucity of reliable data was identified as a problem in dealing with UCA. (Patronek and Zawistowski, 2002; Clancy and Rowan, 2003). The fragmentation of animal sheltering, with a myriad of smaller groups and shelters having been set up over the last 10 years, is thought to have made data collection and situational analysis even more difficult (Patronek, 2006).

Worldwide there have been deficiencies in how shelter population management is assessed. The portions of animals that are adopted or euthanized, why they are relinquished, and their source of acquisition, are all questions for which there have been little data (Salman et al, 1998). It is great to see some research now happening in this area.

Although there are improvements in the broader recording of UCA (incoming animals, euthanasia, etc) in some jurisdictions, there would be great benefit if more consistent recording of data from pounds and shelters was done on an annual basis.

Recent selected figures from Australia

It saddens me that there is so much negative media on the issue of UCA in Australia, when there has been so much improvement. I worked for many years (starting in 1988) in dealing first hand in animal shelters where large numbers of animals were being euthanased. I recall over 270 cats being euthanased in one day at the RSPCA NSW main shelter at Yagoona.

A marked decline can be seen in the RSPCA statistics for cat and dog intakes and euthanasias at shelters in Australia since 2007. From the RSPCA National figures published on the website (www.rspca.org.au) there can be seen approximate drops of 15% in dog euthanasias and 10% in cats. Unpublished NSW government pound data on euthanasia shows a significant reduction for dogs in the order of 20% and a smaller one for cats.

With increase focus on UCA there is greater risk figures could be inflated as a means of "marketing the issue". Examining euthanasia rates in the US which is the most comparable country to Australia, wide variations are seen in the dog and cat estimates. In the US, figures between 3.5 and 5 million are cited but others have come up with 8-10 million. Perhaps the most reliable figure accepted by mainstream commentators is 3.7 million dogs and cats in 2008 (<http://www.americanhumane.org/about-us/newsroom/fact-sheets/animal-shelter-euthanasia.html>). This equates to 12.16 deaths/1000 human population.

In NSW, in 2008, it has been estimated that around 60,000 dogs and cats were euthanased. These figures need to be reviewed to assure animal welfare organisations that operate impound facilities are not counted more than once. Nevertheless, taking them as accurate, this figure equates to 8.57 deaths/1000 human population. In 2009 statistics from Blacktown Animal Holding Facility (the largest impound facility in greater Sydney which serves a human population of approximately 900,000) showed 4152 dogs and cats were euthanased. This equates to 4.78 deaths/1000 human population, with the dog rate being only 1.17. There was a dramatic decline in euthanasia rate in dogs at that facility from around 50% to 20%.

The role of smaller animal welfare and rescue groups needs to be acknowledged. In particular, the contribution of pound and shelter volunteers (friends of the shelter, pound) have the potential to improve the rehabilitation and presentation (and thus sale) of dogs and cats in animal holding facilities. It is sad that in some cases there have been destructive interactions between volunteers and management and other workers at animal holding facilities. When supportive volunteers work in a collaborative way they are an immense power for good. In some cases, the good work that is done is undermined by an unwillingness to work peaceably with management and Council employees. This is particularly the case when negative media campaigns are waged against Councils and their employees who are trying hard to improve the situation.

Trap-Neuter-Return

There has been continued, though somewhat covert support for Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) programs in Australia. The practice is technically illegal as most state's forbid the release of non-native species without a permit. It is thought that there would be little political support to promote TNR, in part because of the more negative attitude Australians have toward cats. It is unlikely that TNR programs will be effective in Australia and other cat management programs, like the Victorian Bureau of Animal Welfare inspired, "Who's for Cats" program show more promise in reducing semi-owned cats which have been shown to be the major source of cats euthanased in pounds and shelters.

The early work that was used to justify TNR was based around colonies of cats that were resident on US University campuses or on islands (Slater, 2004; Stoskopf, 2004). More recent work in less segregated communities has shown how ineffective TNR is and how overrated it may have been. (Finkler et al, 2011; Gunther et al, 2011; Jongman, 2006; Webb, 2006). TNR is less likely to be effective in Australia because of climate, human population density and some unique cultural values towards cats in Australia. It would be politically dangerous for politicians to pursue TNR. There are still major concerns that cats are not being managed adequately at a local government level in NSW. Research from Victoria indicates "semi-owned" cats and "cat colonies" are major contributors to the cats coming into pounds and shelters in that state. (Marston et al, 2005).

Early aged sterilization

It is likely early aged sterilization in shelters and some pounds has assisted in the declining numbers that have occurred since the mid 90s. Australia is blessed to have a very high rate of voluntary sterilization. It was thought that there might be more focus on the age of sterilization with a review conducted by the RSPCA. This review highlights there are still recommendations from some of the most comprehensive papers on Early Age Sterilization that dogs should not be ovario-hysterectomised as early as 8 weeks of age which is now a common occurrence in dogs and cats in shelters. (Spain et al, 2004). There is danger in mandating a medical or surgical practice when subsequent findings may indicate it might not be in the best interests of the patient.

Mandatory sterilization

There have been calls for mandatory sterilization laws to be implemented in Australia with the concept being picked up from a similar drive in the USA. As these laws fail to deal with the problem areas of unowned animals and owners that don't obey laws they are ineffective. Where they have been passed in Australia there has not been a concomitant decline in shelter intake or euthanasia and in some cases in the US where it has been implemented there have been rises in euthanasia rates after a trend of reducing rates prior to their implementation. A good understanding of mandatory sterilization and why it doesn't work can be gained from the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. See <http://www.aspca.org/about-us/policy-positions/mandatory-spay-neuter-laws.aspx>. It highlights the issue that passing poor legislation, particularly that is difficult to enforce, is counterproductive.

Pet shops and puppy farms

There have been a number of other political issues that have arisen in Australia related to UCA. Animal rights groups and some independent politicians have called for the banning of the sale of dogs and cats from pet shops. Given that the percentage of animals that are supplied from this source in Australia is small and the increasing levels of regulation already in place it is thought that these may not only be ineffective but detrimental.

There has been much focus on "puppy farms" in the media but little clear and accurate quantification of how much this leads to UCA. Puppy farms have been defined by the Pet Industry Association of Australia as 'Large-scale breeding facilities where animals are kept in over-crowded, unsanitary conditions, where there is excessive breeding without regard for genetic health and little or no socialisation.' There has not been clear separation of those producing puppies that have become puppy farmers from those who are suffering from mental issues and have become animal hoarders. As the chief veterinarian for 15 years in NSW the greatest problems we faced were with those who were hoarding-some had been producing pups as pure bred dog breeders and some were associated with animal rescue and welfare groups. Animal hoarders made a very significant contribution to the numbers of dogs and cats coming to the shelter and those being euthanased (Lawrie, 2005; Patronek et al, 2006).

Auditing of pounds

In 2010 I was contracted by a large Council in the Sydney metropolitan area to develop and perform an audit on the operation of the animal holding facility they ran. There would be great benefit in a national or statewide approach requiring regular independent audits of animal holding facilities that allowed for benchmarking to occur. There is potential that service provision for this could come from the University Veterinary Schools, a number of which are developing capability in shelter medicine. This is a field of greater prominence in the US with a number of chairs funded by Maddie's Fund eg University of California, Davis. Not only would the universities be able to audit the facilities but they would be able to provide advice to management and gather data for research purposes to help with the problem.

RESOURCE EXPENDITURE BY COUNCILS

There should be information released by the time this paper is presented that will show the cost benefit of the Community Animal Welfare Schemes (CAWS) that have been run in NSW by the RSPCA in collaboration with Councils and the Australian Veterinary Association. Basically this shows that if councils spend \$10,000 on preventative steps like education, microchipping and targeted sterilization programs, they will save more than this on reduced shelter and companion animal management costs.

MOBILE CLINICS AND NON-SURGICAL STERILIZATION

Mobile sterilization clinics, in my opinion, have been overrated and are not suited to Australian conditions. The set up and operating costs are not beneficial and the equivalent volume of sterilizations they managed compared to static clinics is poor. Non-surgical sterilization showed so much potential but the strength of the reproductive capacity of mammals has thwarted many promised breakthroughs. We might be surprised tomorrow!

Conclusion

It is my belief the many efforts of a multitude of stakeholders has led to a gradual improvement in the problem of UCA in Australia over the last three decades. This is more pronounced in dogs. I believe that the situation in cats is worse because they are more prolific breeders, because of the misguided feeding of semi-owned or unowned cats and because of inadequate cat management.

It would be very useful to gather comprehensive national statistics and conduct proper analysis and research using those statistics to measure the effect of measures currently done. It is important statistics

are measured per 1000 human population. This helps to allow accurate benchmarking between countries, jurisdictions and communities.

It is clear any program to deal with UCA must have a substantive educational component. Education is more cost effective than subsidised desexing. Targeted desexing programs, which have a means tested component, should be delivered to key problem areas (country towns, indigenous communities and housing commission areas). The ongoing rise in the standards of behavioural management of all dogs and especially of pound and shelter dogs for adoption is likely to have reduced euthanasia rates and will play a role in the continued reduction. More creative ways must continue to be applied to the adoption of pound and shelter dogs and cats including the transportation of animals from areas of excess to those of increasing shortage.

The management of animal pounds and shelters should be scrutinized with codes being approved for shelters, including those of animal welfare organizations, as well as pounds. Regular audits need to be performed and then benchmarking done. There is a role for university veterinary schools to play in this area. Time should not be wasted pursuing legislative change as the answer to the problem. Continuing work in managing animal hoarders has the potential to reduce the numbers of unwanted (and often unadoptable) dogs and cats across NSW by the thousands.

Clearly no one strategy will solve the problem, there is no quick fix, but it is critical there is analysis of strategies and the best ones are used. Different strategies are required for different areas and jurisdictions.

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Appendix 1

Australian Veterinary Association • Unwanted Companion Animal Task Force

"Failure to standardise and broaden data collection continues to hinder progress in strategically dealing with the issue (UCA)" -Clancy and Rowan, 2003

"Untargeted spay neuter wastes 75% of funds"
- Marsh, 2003

SOLVING THE PROBLEM OF UNWANTED COMPANION ANIMALS (UCA) – THE FIVE PRINCIPLES

1. Understand the root causes of the problem
 - a. Conduct good quality research and compile accurate meaningful statistics
 - b. Identify where animals are coming from and why they have been surrendered to a shelter

Important considerations:

- There are regional differences – due to climate¹, location², human demographics³, legislation⁴, enforcement⁵, education⁶, surrender policy of shelter⁷, local veterinary capacity⁸, etc.

1 eg: cat breeding season is longer in warmer climates than cooler climates

2 A shelter located in a high profile position may attract a higher number of surrenders

3 Surrender rates have been known to vary in different human socio-economic areas

4 eg: a 'cat curfew' or legal trapping of roaming cats will increase the rate of cats entering a shelter

5 Well enforced legislation has a different effect on surrender rates than poorly enforced legislation

6 The introduction of a good quality education campaign may reduce the burden on shelters where no education was provided before

7 Shelters that have open, unrestricted surrender policies may see more surrenders than limited entry shelters

8 Regions with poor or zero access to veterinary services may have a greater animal welfare burden

Appendix 1 • CONTINUED

- Strong consideration must be given to not just the quantity (numbers) of animals involved, but an assessment and evaluation must be made about their suitability as a potential pet animal through adoption program. Analysis of this “quality” measure enables a deeper understanding of root cause⁹
- There are *multiple* causes for animals being surrendered to shelters – they need to be identified for each shelter / region.

2. Education in responsible pet ownership / guardianship

- a. Education is to be encouraged at all levels and through all channels

Important considerations:

- Education programs should be of high quality and be independently evaluated.
- Education is a powerful adjunct to most other programs.
- The provision of education must have both short and long term objectives.

3. Identification

- a. Encourage identification of owned animals in order to differentiate them from un-owned animals
- b. There are multiple methods of identification

Important considerations:

- Many animals (particularly cats) in the shelter population are not identified.
- Definitions of ‘pet’ and ‘owned pet’ will help to clarify much contention within the issues¹⁰.

4. Strategically target programs such as desexing

- a. ‘Blanket’ whole-population desexing campaigns are unlikely to achieve

considerable further reduction in shelter admissions, due to the already high level of voluntary compliance with desexing practices¹¹.

- b. Targeted (‘niche’) desexing campaigns can be well managed, measured and evaluated in the short term, and can have a profound effect on the surrender rates.

Important considerations:

- Accurate data enables identification of target animal populations (eg semi-owned cats); target demographic segments; or target geographic area.
- Accurate data further enables a decision as to whether a desexing program occurs in isolation, has adjuncts such as education, or is completely replaced by another initiative.

5. Balance population to demand

- a. Supply and demand mismatches are known to occur¹²
- b. Improved adoption processes can dramatically increase the adoption rate and reduce the return rate¹³

Important considerations:

- There are complex inter-relationships of cat subpopulations which confuse our understanding of supply and demand of cats into pet ownership.
- The kitten season phenomenon makes matching the demand for kittens a challenge.
- If a demand for pets by responsible pet owners is not filled by responsible sources, then irresponsible sources will fill this gap.
- Balancing population to demand will require creative solutions.¹⁴

9 eg if most dogs surrendered to a shelter are young adults with behavioural problems, then the problem is not one of numbers ‘born’, it is a problem of numbers ‘retained’ as pets

10 It is recognised that not all ‘pets’ in welfare shelters have come from homes, which suggests that the meaning of ‘pet’ needs clarification. If they are not ‘pets’, then how should we refer to them? This is particularly true of the term ‘pet overpopulation’.

11 Annual surveys of the owned pet cat population find that desexing rates within this population exceed 91% for breeding age female cats.

12 RSPCA ACT has recently received several hundred kittens flown from northern QLD to satisfy the demand in ACT. RSPCA Yagoona (Sydney) brings puppies and kittens in from rural centres to alleviate a supply – demand mismatch.

13 At least welfare shelter has increased adoption rates by 20% over 2 years through the use of an integrated temperament / matching / training program. Improved cat adoptions have occurred through increasing exposure of adoptable cats through responsible non-shelter outlets.

14 eg interstate relocation of puppies and kittens, a recent initiative by RSPCA QLD and ACT.

BIOGRAPHY

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Dr Mark Lawrie has recently worked as a locum veterinarian at 3 veterinary clinics in Sydney-All Natural Vet Care, the Animal Welfare League and Bondi Junction Vet Hospital. He is also working with veterinarians and companies to promote new veterinary products and services in Australia and Asia and works as an independent consultant on a range of veterinary and animal welfare issues. He was National President of the Australian Veterinary Association from 2008-2010 and prior to this Chief Veterinarian with RSPCA NSW for 15 years, overseeing a team of veterinary and lay staff of up to 90 in 4 clinics. He has been involved in a number of important animal welfare issues including the "Link between violence to animals and People", "Animal Hoarders" and "Unwanted Companion Animals".





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