

Pet-care practices of Victorian dog, cat, rabbit and bird owners: what issues should we be targeting with educational materials?

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Abstract

The welfare of Australian pets and their impact in the neighbourhood is largely determined by the pet-care practices adopted by their owners. It makes sense, therefore, for Councils to ensure as far as possible that their constituents are well informed about appropriate pet-care practices. This includes the provision of adequate nutrition, housing and veterinary care, as well as mental and social stimulation. In early 2013 the Victorian Bureau of Animal Welfare commissioned a state-wide survey to assess the pet-care practices of a representative sample of dog, cat, rabbit and bird owners. The data obtained will be used to develop profiles that will enable identification of deficits in pet-care practices that could be addressed by targeted community education programs, and will also provide a baseline against which the results of targeted interventions can be compared.

Introduction

In Australia, animal management officers (AMOs) are charged not only with effectively minimising the public nuisance caused by animals kept as pets and companions, but also with promoting responsible and considerate pet animal ownership (Australian Institute of Animal Management 2013). These two core activities are intimately connected, with animals which are not responsibly owned being those most likely to create a public nuisance. The concept of public nuisance is relatively well defined, being derived from English common law dating back to the 12th century. The concept of responsible and considerate pet ownership, however, is poorly defined and very much reflects cultural contingencies; the responsibilities of pet owners vary markedly depending on where they happen to reside and when. If we are to expect our AMO's to promote responsible and considerate pet animal ownership, the characteristics consistent with this requirement in contemporary Australian communities must be expressed in measurable and, hence, manageable terms.

One aspect of responsible and considerate ownership requires meeting the welfare needs of the animals in question. These are also problematic to specify. According to a 1965 United Kingdom government report on livestock animal welfare, the Brambell report, livestock animals must be free "to stand up, ie down, turn around, groom themselves and stretch

their limbs" in order to have good welfare (Farm Animal Welfare Council 2009). This short list, referred to as the 'five freedoms', was later expanded by the Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC), into the following list:

1. **Freedom from Hunger and Thirst** - by ready access to fresh water and a diet to maintain full health and vigour.
2. **Freedom from Discomfort** - by providing an appropriate environment including shelter and a comfortable resting area.
3. **Freedom from Pain, Injury or Disease** - by prevention or rapid diagnosis and treatment.
4. **Freedom to Express Normal Behaviour** - by providing sufficient space, proper facilities and company of the animal's own kind.
5. **Freedom from Fear and Distress** - by ensuring conditions and treatment which avoid mental suffering.

In order to measure whether livestock animals are experiencing good welfare, according to the requirements outlined in the Five Freedoms, welfare auditing systems are being developed around the world (eg. Barnett & Glatz 2004; Grandin 2005). These auditing systems are often based on self-report by the animals' primary caretaker, although more objective and independent assessments are becoming increasingly common in some industries. Generally, a welfare score is calculated based on the specific parameters described in the audit, and a higher score often indicates better perceived welfare of the animal(s) (Johnsen et al 2001).

Although the FAWC's five freedoms were written primarily for livestock animals living in intensive agricultural systems, animals kept as companions and pets have similar needs for ready access to appropriate food, water and veterinary care and an environment conducive to good physical and mental health. Hence, they may benefit from a similar auditing process. Indeed, it is quite surprising to find that a formal auditing process for pet welfare has not yet been published in the scientific literature. This may reflect the fact that pet animals live deeply embedded in human communities, primarily in private homes beyond the reach of formal audit systems sponsored by government or industry sources, a limitation that is difficult to overcome.

Importantly, however, while pets are often assumed to have good welfare relative to animals kept in other contexts, the extent to which pet owners currently engage in responsible management practices that optimise the welfare of their pets is unknown. We do know that pet ownership is ubiquitous in the Western world, including in Victoria, where there are an estimated 906,000 dogs, 581,000 cats, 1.8 million birds, and 750,000 other pets, such as rabbits, horses, and guinea pigs (Australian Companion Animal Council 2007). As is the case with other countries, and with other Australian states and territories, there has been little research to explore the practices being used by Victorian pet owners in managing their pets. Therefore, there are virtually no data available to support claims that the welfare of pet animals is generally good, or to establish benchmarks that can be re-evaluated over time to determine whether pet animal welfare is improving, declining, or remaining constant. Many Australian councils and organisations work hard to promote responsible and considerate pet animal ownership, but there are few data by which the success of their efforts can be assessed.

In 2012, the People's Dispensary for Sick Animals (PDSA), a veterinary charity in the United Kingdom, developed a survey to examine the pet-care practices of owners in the UK (www.pdsa.org.uk). This survey was made available online and completed voluntarily by pet owners in the UK, with the data provided subsequently being used to determine whether or not pet animals around the country were experiencing good welfare (People's Dispensary for Sick Animals 2012). While the extent to which the voluntary participants were representative of pet owners in general could not be determined, the results proved to be of great value, being displayed on the PDSA website and used to develop recommendations and strategies for improved welfare.

Owner reports of their pet-care practices cannot provide an objective measure of animal welfare and they are unable to be easily validated by reference to objective data. However, owner reports may provide the only means available of gaining baseline knowledge about pet welfare and, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, they may be assumed to be reasonably accurate. Because pet owners are not subject to the same industry requirements to adhere to best practice as are people who care for animals in commercial environments, such as agribusinesses, there is no reason to believe that they would falsify their reports in surveys. This is particularly the case when the surveys are conducted anonymously by an independent agent. At the very least, owner reports may identify issues warranting further investigation using more objective means.

The study described in this report was commissioned by the Victorian Bureau of Animal Welfare in order to examine a wide range of pet care practices engaged

in across the state of Victoria. The aim of the research was to understand the different ways in which people care for their pets, including management of their environments and behavioural problems. The practices assessed fall into five broad needs, which loosely correspond to the five freedoms defined by the FAWC. These five needs are:

1. **Environmental** – is the pet's environment being managed to ensure the pet's safety and well-being?
2. **Diet and exercise** – is the pet being fed suitable amounts of appropriate foods, and receiving adequate exercise?
3. **Behavioural** – does the pet currently exhibit behavioural problems, and has it been adequately socialised and trained?
4. **Social** – is the pet often left alone without human company? If so, is the pet provided with mental stimulation in the form of environmental enrichment (eg. toys or games) or the company of another animal?
5. **Health** – are the pet's health needs being met with regular trips to the veterinarian and regular health care practices at home (eg. grooming, dental care)?

Methods

Participants

A representative sample of 1,500 participants from throughout Victoria was recruited to complete an online survey through an online market research company. The participants were members of an online research panel who agreed to complete surveys in exchange for a small sum of money. Of the initial sample of 1,500 people, 975 people owned a pet bird, cat, dog, or rabbit. The most common pets were dogs, owned by 39% of participants, and cats, owned by 30% of participants. Only 8% of respondents reported owning a pet bird, and 3% reported owning a rabbit. Just over one-third (35%) owned none of those animals.

A boost sample of 129 participants was recruited to increase the number of participants who owned either a pet bird or a pet rabbit. This was necessary because the original sample of 1,500 did not include sufficient owners of these pet species to produce reliable data. Therefore, a total of 1,629 Victorians completed the survey.

Of the 1,629 participants, just over half (53.1%) were female. Most respondents (79.1%) lived in greater Melbourne. The other 20.9% lived in regional Victoria. A small proportion of respondents (5.4%) reported an annual household income (before tax) of under \$30,000, while 17% reported earning \$100,000 or more. The majority of participants had earned either a university (36%) or trade school (29.6%) degree. Almost half (47.4%) worked full time; 28.1% worked

part time and the remaining 24.5% reported that they were not engaging in any paid work. Most participants were married (53.1%) or in a de facto relationship (16%). Another 21.8% were single and 9.1% were widowed, divorced, or separated.

Materials

The Victorian Pet-Care Practices survey was developed after a review of the literature and discussions with pet care industry experts examining the different welfare needs for birds, cats, dogs and rabbits. A section of the survey was written for each species, with six survey sections included in total:

- basic demographics (7 questions)
- pet-keeping practices for pet birds (61 questions)
- pet-keeping practices for pet cats (53 questions)
- pet-keeping practices for pet dogs (50 questions)
- pet-keeping practices for pet rabbits (52 questions)
- further demographics (7 questions)

The questions were developed based on welfare needs for each species that fell under five categories: environmental needs, diet and exercise needs, behavioural needs, social needs, and health needs.

Procedure

Ethics approval for the project was granted by La Trobe University Faculty of Science, Technology and Engineering Human Ethics Committee (FHEC12/NR96). Online data collection proceeded for two weeks in January 2013. Galaxy Research, a market research company, was contracted by the researchers to develop a 37-page online survey for completion by the representative sample of Victorians. The recruitment of participants proceeded online through PureProfile, a company that manages paid online surveys. In order to ensure that the participant group was a representative sample, quotas based on location, gender, and age were applied.

All respondents completed the demographic questions (sections A and F). Pet owners completed the sections of the survey that were relevant to the types of pet species they owned. For instance, if someone owned a cat and a dog, they answered the sections related to those two pet types. If someone owned all four pet types, they completed the entire survey. If a participant had more than one of the same species, they were instructed to complete that section based on one animal.

Analysis

All data were analysed using PASW statistical software, version 20. Descriptive statistics were used to describe trends, and Pearson's correlations determined whether there were relationships between pet-keeping practices and demographic variables. When appropriate, logistic or multiple regression was used to ascertain whether specific

behaviours could be significantly predicted by relevant demographic variables.

Results and Discussion

Behaviour management

While most dog owners reported that their pet had received some training, the data presented in Table 1 show that large percentages of owners of other species reported that their pet had not received any training at all. Training is important for all pet species because it teaches the pet how to behave appropriately in human environments, potentially reducing the incidence of undesirable behaviours later in life and the possibility of the pet creating a public nuisance. Socialisation is also important, but 17% of cat owners and 7% of dog owners reported that their pet was not very well socialised, or not socialised at all, to other people as a kitten or puppy.

TABLE 1 Percentage of people who reported that their pet is not trained

Species	Percentage
Bird	44
Cat	23
Dog	6
Rabbit	85

A high frequency of pet owners also reported that their animals exhibited many undesirable behaviours, as shown in Table 2. For example, nearly half (45%) of the rabbit owners surveyed reported that their rabbit often or sometimes behaved in an excessively aggressive way. While this is unlikely to create a public nuisance, it indicates that either the animals are not being adequately trained to interact appropriately with people, and/or that they are distressed by these interactions and may not be well suited for the role of being a child's pet. Many birds were also considered to be excessively aggressive by their owners. Meanwhile, a high proportion of dogs and cats were excessively fearful of loud noises. This can result in public nuisance as it may lead to frightened animals escaping from their owner's care. Dogs tended to be described as excessively anxious and cats and rabbits as excessively destructive. Such behavioural problems often reflect poor management practices on the part of owners.

TABLE 2 Percentage of people who reported that their pet often or sometimes excessively exhibits undesirable behaviours

Species	Fear of loud noises	Aggression	Separation anxiety	Destructive behaviours	Inappropriate elimination indoors	Anxious behaviours
Bird	27	41	15	21	n/a	21
Cat	46	18	18	35	15	23
Dog	49	16	30	15	15	35
Rabbit	33	45	19	37	27	21

Nearly one-third (32%) of cat owners and 34% of dog owners who reported that their pet exhibited excessive aggression were also dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their pet's behaviour. This trend continued with 29.4% of cat owners who reported that their cat inappropriately toilets indoors. Also, over one-quarter (27%) of dog owners who indicated that their dog exhibits separation anxiety were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their dog's behaviour, as well as 61% of people who reported that their dog engages in excessive destructive behaviours. This is a problem because people who are dissatisfied with their pet's behaviour may be more likely to relinquish their pet to an animal shelter or council pound, or to abandon it in the community.

Health needs management

As shown in Table 3, the vast majority of respondents reported that they do not have health insurance for their pet. This is potentially important because it is associated with the frequency of visits to a veterinarian for a health check. Of the cat owners who reported not having insurance, 26% had not taken their cat for a veterinary check in the past year. This compared to only 9% of cat owners who did have pet insurance. The trend is similar for dogs: 10% of owners who did not have insurance had not taken their dog for a veterinary check in the past year, compared to only 4% of respondents who did have pet insurance.

TABLE 3 Percentage of respondents who report that they do not have health insurance for their pet.

<i>Species</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Bird	97
Cat	94
Dog	92
Rabbit	92

Among all bird owners, nearly two-thirds (62%) had not taken their bird for a veterinary check in the past year. Also, 59% reported that they had not vaccinated their bird against common diseases, including nearly half (49%) of respondents in Greater Melbourne. Another 44% had not had their bird checked and/or treated for lice and other external parasites, and nearly half (48%) had not had it checked and/or treated for intestinal worms. Among rabbit owners, over one-third (35%) had not taken their rabbit for a veterinary check in the past year, with a similar percentage (37%) not having vaccinated their rabbit against common diseases or checked and/or treated it for intestinal worms. Another 26% had not had their rabbit checked and/or treated for lice and other external parasites.

Pets who are not vaccinated or treated regularly for internal and/or external parasites are more likely to represent a zoonotic health risk for their owners and other members of the community. The general lack of

vaccinations among pets in Victoria is therefore of some concern and this is especially true among cats and dogs that are allowed to roam free. Indeed, the majority (56%) of cat owners who reported never having taken their cat to the veterinarian for a health check also reported that their cat roams free when outdoors. This is also true of 64.3% of people who reported that their cat had never been vaccinated against common diseases. This pattern was also apparent among dog owners. Half of the respondents (50%) who reported that their dog had never visited the vet for a health check also allowed the dog to roam free and 27.3% of people who reported that their dog had never been vaccinated against common diseases also reported that their dog is allowed to roam free. These animals could easily encounter diseased animals and become infected with easily preventable diseases that could then be spread to other animals or humans. Public education concerning the need for regular veterinary care is therefore recommended.

Environmental management

Nearly half (49%) of the cat owners in the survey allowed their cat to roam free when outdoors, compared to just over one-quarter of dog owners (26%). A small percentage also indicated that their cat (4%) or dog (3%) sleeps outdoors in the open. This is concerning because roaming cats and dogs may put themselves in harm's way or risk the safety of humans, other pets or native animals. Nearly one-third (29%) of respondents who lived in Greater Melbourne reported allowing their dog to roam freely when outdoors. This is of particular concern because the probability of a wandering dog encountering a strange child or being hit by a car is highest in urban and semi-urban areas.

A small but substantial minority of pet owners reported that their pets are not well supervised, or not supervised at all, when interacting with children, as shown in Table 4. This is inadvisable because children may harm pets if they are not well supervised, or may become victims of aggressive behaviour by pets. Nearly two-thirds (65%) of the respondents who reported that their pets were not supervised around children at all were between 35 and 49 years old.

TABLE 4 Percentage of respondents who reported that their pet is not well supervised, or not supervised at all, when interacting with children

<i>Species</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Bird	4
Cat	9
Dog	5
Rabbit	3

Somewhat surprising was the percentage of respondents who reported having lost a pet that they

were unable to find, as shown in Table 5. What ultimately happened to these pets cannot be surmised, but it is likely that at least some of them were euthanased or died on their own or following admission to a shelter or pound. Over half (58%) of the dog owners who reported losing a pet that they could not subsequently find were between the ages of 25 and 34 years, whereas no respondents who were 55 years of age or older reported losing a dog. This may mean that messages about containment could be more targeted. Among cat owners, 72% of respondents who had permanently lost a cat were between 25 and 44 years of age.

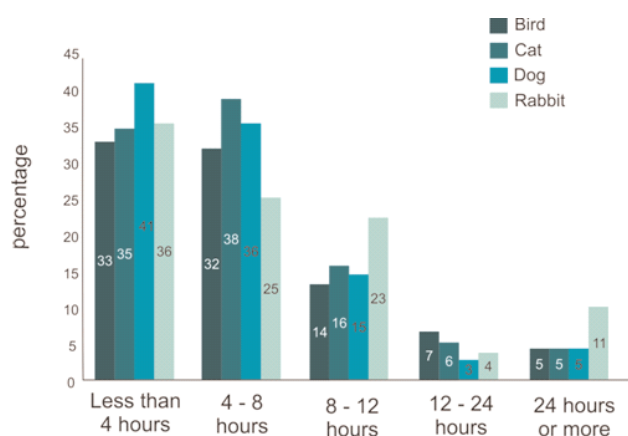
TABLE 5 Percentage of owners who report having lost a pet that they were unable to find, by species

Species	Percentage
Bird	14
Cat	10
Dog	5
Rabbit	12

Social Needs Management

Perhaps one of the most striking findings from the survey is that, while the vast majority of the respondents indicated that they considered their pet to be a member of their family, and that taking care of their pet was one of their highest priorities, many Victorian pets are extremely socially isolated, often being left alone for long periods each day while their owners are at work. While pet owners report employing a range of strategies to provide mental stimulation for their animals when the owner is absent, some pet owners fail to provide for their pet's most basic social needs, even when they leave their animal unattended for more than one night. Figure 1 shows the maximum consecutive time that owners report leaving their pet alone each week without human company.

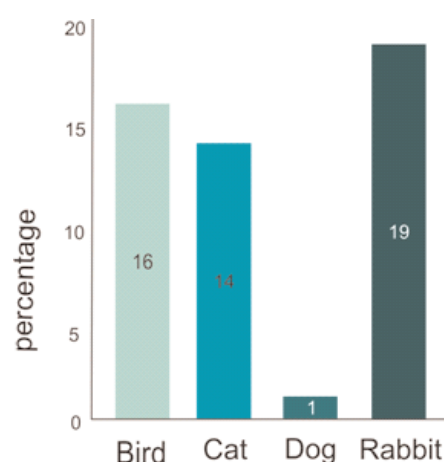
FIGURE 1 Longest consecutive period during an average week that owners report leaving their pet at home without human company



Diet and Exercise Management

The vast majority of our respondents indicated that they were confident in their ability to take care of their pet and most felt that their pet was well cared for relative to other pets. Over 80% of pet owners in each species category, however, reported that their pet was at an ideal weight. This is not consistent with reports from veterinary studies showing that many companion pets are obese. Consistent with this latter possibility, many pet owners fed their animal inappropriate foods and failed to provide it with adequate exercise. The percentage of people who report that they provide no exercise for their pets is shown in Figure 2.

FIGURE 2 Percentage of pet owners who report that they provide no exercise for their pets



Conclusion

The aim of this research was to establish baseline data on pet keeping practices among a representative sample of Victorians, with only a small selection of the findings being described in this paper. In terms of more effective and responsible management, it is of interest that many significant group differences were identified. For example, older owners rarely, if ever, reported losing their pets, while this was relatively common among younger age groups. This means that younger owners should be targeted for educational campaigns to reduce the incidence of lost pets. There were also correlations between high-risk practices such as permitting pets to roam free and lack of regular veterinary care, including administration of appropriate vaccines. When roaming animals are returned to their owners, therefore, the owners should be informed of the importance of regular veterinary care to reduce transmission of zoonotic diseases. Finally, all pet owners should be encouraged to adequately train and socialise their animal. This should reduce the incidence of problematic behaviours that could ultimately result in relinquishment of the pet to a shelter or harm being caused to members of the surrounding community. Responsible and considerate

pet animal ownership requires that owners adequately address the needs of their pets, and we hope with this research to better inform those working in animal management about pet care practices which contribute to good welfare and, hence, responsible ownership.

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About the author

Pauleen Bennett has been studying human-animal relationships for over a decade and is recognised internationally for her expertise in this area. She is particularly interested in understanding how effective animal management promotes both the welfare of animals and the well-being of their owners and the broader community. Pauleen is currently Director of the Anthrozoology Research Group, based in the School of Psychological Science at La Trobe University in Bendigo. She has been researching human-animal relationships, particularly as they affect urban animal management, for over 10 years and presents her work regularly at national and international conferences.

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