

Shared community solutions for life and death matters

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Abstract

This presentation covers the progress being made with a model of full stakeholder participation to achieve the goals of responsible pet ownership and ending the euthanasia of hundreds of thousands of stray and abandoned cats and dogs in pounds and shelters in Australia each year. Traditionally, animal management and animal welfare have been seen to have different and exclusive goals, and other stakeholder groups have not seen how their goals are also complementary. However, agreement that the killing of thousands of healthy cats and dogs is unacceptable is a powerful motivating force. With shared knowledge, shared solutions involving the influence of each stakeholder group and preventative strategies, these goals can be achieved.

The vision

Imagine the day when people will be fully aware that caring responsibly for a cat or dog needs planning, knowledge and skill and a commitment for 10-20 years.

Imagine the day when there are no more unwanted pets because it is accepted that all pets are desexed prior to sale (unless being sold to knowledgeable compassionate breeders).

Imagine all owned pets are identified, trained and kept safely and contentedly on the owners' own properties except when out with their trained owner for regular walks and socialising.

Imagine a compassionate society that does not blame cats or dogs for the wildlife damage that humans have caused, but works to care for and desex even the unowned ones.

Imagine the day when there will be no need to euthanase a healthy cat or dog.

These joint goals are part of a community change initiative on the Gold Coast involving a range of stakeholders. It includes animal management, animal welfare, vets, breeders, the pet industry, dog trainers, wildlife groups and, most of all, the general community, all using their particular areas of influence to prevent pet overpopulation and irresponsible ownership.

Community prevention

The preventative approach has been emerging in the management of many community problems over the last decade or so. We now seek to proactively prevent the costly health impacts of smoking, alcohol, and, one of the latest, obesity, by revealing the causes and impacts to the community, and introducing strong laws and educational initiatives to support more responsible behaviour.

It is time to reveal to the community the costly financial, ethical and environmental impacts of over-breeding, poorly prepared animal owners, and pet-unfriendly housing policies, and apply the same preventative and supportive strategies. If all stakeholders work together, and take a leadership role within their own areas of influence to prevent problems developing, the vision explained above will be achieved, and the specific goals of each stakeholder group as well.

While animal management departments primarily concern themselves with community safety by investing their energy and budgets into managing stray and untrained animals. The need to euthanase the unclaimed, may be seen to be inadvertently supporting a disposable laissez-faire mentality towards pets, and a never-ending flow of hundreds of thousands of stray and abandoned animals. The proactive preventative approach involves bringing stakeholders together to support laws, policies and educational strategies that support desexing and identification of pets and training of owners **before** they get their pets.

Persuading town planners, body corporate and retirement village organisations to develop pet and wildlife friendly housing designs and policies will also reduce stray and abandoned pets by making it easier for people to be responsible pet owners and to keep their pets.

Animal welfare groups who invest all their time attempting to adopt out more unwanted animals than there are suitable homes, are in an unwinnable battle also. The proactive approach is working with other stakeholders and channelling community resources into desexing, identification, education, and training of owners, early, before the problems occur.

Veterinarians adhering to the 6 months-or-over age for desexing are continuing to sustain the flow of unwanted litters being born, leading to often unwelcome pressures to desex at unprofitable rates from animal welfare groups and pet-owners who don't factor in desexing in their budgets. While many vets do oblige by offering discounts on desexing, the preventative contribution vets can make is to enter partnerships with breeders and pet shops to desex and microchip all pets before sale to create a responsible pet owning culture. This would prevent accidental litters that occur particularly with cats, who can be pregnant before 6 months, and breeding because of the perceived prestige of a sexually entire pet, or for profit, or because kittens and puppies are cute. Desexing prior to sale will not mean a loss of business for vets; it will actually ensure that all animals receive veterinary care. Unwanted litters are seldom seen in private vet clinics because many of these animals don't ever get homes. They are part of the over 200 000 killed in pounds and shelters in Australia annually.

For as long as some breeders and the pet industry sell undesexed, unidentified pets to poorly prepared owners, there will continue to be stray and abandoned pets, and pressure from the environmentally-oriented community to reduce pet ownership. The preventative approach is to ensure that people can only acquire desexed and identified pets (unless they have the knowledge to be a responsible compassionate breeder who socialises their pups or kittens and ensures they have responsible caring homes). The pet industry needs to ensure that all owners are fully informed when thinking of getting a pet, and trained and supported if there are any difficulties, so that the animals are fully supported.

Dog training organisations are key stakeholders and need to be structured into the purchasing process so that all humans are trained.

The other stakeholder group in this community partnership are the environmental departments and organisations, and wildlife carers who often spend their lives patching up the damage as a result of human-centred intervention in the environment. While it would be better for wildlife if both humans and pets were desexed to limit our rampant environmental damage, promoting desexing and appropriate confinement of pets to give existing wildlife safety and provide enrichment

Euthanasia of unwanted pets – a socially unacceptable strategy

Referring to the list of Urban Animal Management topics over the last decade, it appears not much has been said about the "euthanasia" or killing of healthy pets as a current animal management strategy or of attempts to prevent it. **Yet it is a socially unacceptable strategy which can be used as a powerful motivator to persuade people to behave more responsibly with their pets, which will ultimately help all stakeholder groups achieve their individual goals.**

We are all very aware of the high regard that humans have for their cat and dog companions, the high proportion of pet ownership in Australia and the piles of research papers on how animals improve the lives of people including improving cardiovascular health through encouraging exercise, reducing loneliness, and providing social development for children. Yet we continue to allow hundreds of thousands of these devoted creatures that are so important to human lives to be the victims of owner irresponsibility, and to hide this fact from the community. Nationally, we don't even know exactly how many stray and abandoned animals are killed each year. The figures are extremely difficult to gather. An attempt was made in 1999 by Animals Australia with only a 20% response rate from pounds, and again earlier this year for National Desexing Month by AWL Qld and NDN, with a similarly low response rate. It seems only Victoria and NSW gather a combined figure.

However local animal management departments and welfare groups know their local figures, and the underlying causes and effects. Individual community members and other stakeholder groups like vets, breeders and pet shops, are more distant from the problem and are often unaware that their personal or professional decisions, currently lead to hundreds of thousands of abandoned animals a year, a large proportion of which are still killed.

We need to let the stakeholders, the majority of whom love and value pets, know what is happening and play a part in prevention.

The community change process

On the Gold Coast we started working on a shared community solution process three years ago.

Stage 1. The community needs to know the extent of the problem, and how to be part of the solution.

As all stakeholders need to know at a local level what is happening with their community's abandoned dogs and cats, in the last three years, AWL Qld has been open and frank about the real figures, through meetings with stakeholders and regular news reports, presentations to schools, teachers, teacher trainees, community groups and newsletter articles. We have revealed that despite one of the highest rehoming rates in Australia, there are almost 10,000 stray and abandoned animals annually on the Gold Coast, and currently 3,000 of these never find homes and are humanely euthanased.

While some community changes are made more difficult to solve because there is no agreement that there is a problem, there is widespread community agreement that this is NOT acceptable. So there's a good start! From a newspaper survey in 2003 and ongoing surveying of more than 3000 Gold Coast residents, over 99% agree that it is NOT acceptable.

Of course the other parties in this practice, the abandoned cats and dogs, also unanimously agreed that it is not acceptable either - we have not seen any indication that any of the healthy cats, kittens and dogs that currently are killed want that to happen.

Refuge and pound staff also think it is unacceptable, but do it when faced with the daily reality of too many animals and not enough people wanting them. It is unethical to continue with this practice if we can prevent it.

However the community needs to be aware that it is responsible for the solution as well as the problem. People's energy and creativity expand when they realise they are capable of controlling the challenges in their lives. Focusing on the problems only emphasises the deficiencies of a community instead of the existing strengths and capacity. Action needs to be based on what is possible, building on the input of each stakeholder group. They need to know the research data - what exactly is the problem and how they can fix it.

As all the stray and surrendered animals are cared for at the one pound and AWL refuge site, the issues for the Gold Coast can be easily researched.

With cats, the issues are the seasonal breeding pattern with nearly all kittens born between November and April, without the corresponding increase in the number of people wanting to rehome a cat during this period. This leads to an increase in the euthanasia rate in the summer season.

There are just too many animals being born for the numbers of homes available. The majority of felines at the refuge during the summer season are kittens under 12 weeks of age. In Jan 2004, for example, 64% were kittens 12 weeks or under. Of the cats over 12 weeks, only 39% had been desexed. 58% of all cats and kittens received were owned cats handed in at the refuge and 42% were handed in to Animal Management Officers by members of the public. The reasons for people having unwanted litters include not knowing a cat can be pregnant by 5 months, believing that a cat should have a litter first, and believing that they can't afford desexing.

It has been stated in Dr Chris Baldock's research that in 2003, 91% of female pet cats and 87% of male pet cats 3 months and older were desexed. If this is the case, the remaining population of owned cats is still reproducing at a rate that cannot be absorbed by the community in the summer months. 53% of the 494 cats and kittens in January 2004 had to be euthanased. In October 2004 when there was minimal kitten breeding, the euthanasia rate for cats dropped to 17%.

The problem for stray cats is that owners reclaim only 5% of them whereas approximately 67% of dogs are reclaimed. Yet 95% of strays are not feral cats, they are just not identified.

The problems in relation to dogs on the Gold Coast are quite the opposite. There are far more stray (70%) than surrendered dogs (30%). They end up at refuges because they are not suitably confined, and are readily replaceable in the community due to oversupply. The most commonly euthanased breeds are working dogs and terriers. Together these breeds make up two thirds of animals at the pound and refuge. A quarter of working dog breeds are euthanased because there are not enough homes available for these breeds. While small dogs are all rehomed quickly, there are just too many of the working dog and medium terrier breeds for the homes available. Of the 30% surrendered, the most common reasons are that people find it difficult when they are moving to find accommodation that allows pets, or have difficulty managing their pet's behaviour.

Two of the solutions suggested by AWL Qld for consideration are desexing prior to sale (unless a purchaser has a breeder's permit) and microchipping prior to sale. Community input was sought on these solutions. In the same community newspaper survey and ongoing internet surveys, over 90% of 3000 respondents agreed with these solutions. Perhaps these were the animal lovers in the community and were not necessarily representative of the community as a whole. The Marketing Faculty of Bond University therefore did some independent research, door-knocking a representative sample of the population. There was majority agreement again.

Stage 2 Each stakeholder group needs to be involved in sharing how the problem impacts on them and designing solutions together.

After visiting each stakeholder group, to explain the problems and seeking support to help solve them, a Stakeholder Coalition was formed at the beginning of 2004 to develop and implement solutions. To keep this to a manageable size one or two representatives from each of the following groups make up the Coalition:

AWL Qld, Gold Coast City Council, Australian Veterinary Association, Canine Control Council, Queensland Feline Association, The Pet Industry Association of Australia, Wildlife Preservation Society, Wildcare, Gold Coast Dog Obedience Training Club, International Dog Training School, and RSPCA Qld.

Once you start down this consultative track you discover the issues that need to be addressed. As desexing is the key to preventing unwanted animals being born rather than kill them afterwards, desexing needs to be done before they can have their first litter i.e. 5 months for cats and 6 months for dogs. Desexing prior to sale is the best means of ensuring that animals are going to be desexed before they have a litter as they can be more easily tracked at this point.

However many stakeholders including vets indicated they were unsure about early age desexing. The AVA conducted a survey through their website. While there was a low response rate, it confirmed local responses and an earlier survey by Animals Australia. The majority indicated they never desex at 8-12 weeks and most rarely desex between 12-16 weeks of age. The majority (77%) still recommended 6 months or over for desexing. The main concern was the perceived long term health effects. The majority were interested in receiving more information about early age desexing from scientific papers and journals and conference or workshop sessions.

Research indicates that early age desexing is just as safe as desexing at the traditional age.¹ It is performed successfully in the AWL Qld veterinary clinic on thousands of animals each year. Other welfare organisations around the world are desexing hundreds of thousands of cats and dogs prior to sale. Early age desexing is also perfect for private practice. Benefits include less bleeding, quicker recovery, less healing time, and stitching and less time to perform the operation.²

Another issue that arose continually was the lack of knowledge of pet owners and the need to provide complete information at the right time i.e. when people are thinking of getting a pet or as they are buying one.

Discussion and research by the stakeholders about these underlying issues have led to a number of initiatives.

Stage 3 The stakeholders need to be all involved in the implementation of solutions.

Presentations at the AVA Qld AGM 2005 and the Animal Welfare Chapter of the Australian College of Veterinary Scientists Conference 2005 have encouraged vets to promote desexing between 2 and 4 months of age in private practice to help change community perceptions and practices.

Knowledge and skill development of all potential, new and existing pet owners is essential. To provide the comprehensive knowledge that everyone needs before they get a pet, all stakeholder groups have combined their knowledge and perspectives into a community DVD/Booklet resource "Caring Responsibly for your Dog and Cat" to be given to all potential or new pet owners. Its production was co-funded by AWL Qld and Gold Coast City Council.

It is a complete community resource with animal welfare issues, local laws, veterinary care, and training. The first section is for those thinking about getting a new pet. It lists what needs to be considered before the 10-15 year commitment is undertaken. It then continues sequentially from preparing the home, to desexing and identifying your pet from two to five months of age, to helping your pet to adjust to its new environment and other family members, including other pets, to management and providing environmental enrichment and training to prevent animals straying or being abandoned. Some of the recommendations in the booklet are quite new to many Australian pet owners: desexing between two and four months for cats, and two and five months for dogs; puppy crates to keep your puppy near you yet safe around the home; keeping cats indoors or with added cat enclosures and, if necessary to take your cat outside, training cats on leads and harnesses so that they can enjoy the outdoors but not escape over the fence.

Pet shops and breeders are being encouraged to purchase this resource at cost price and absorb this cost into the price of the pet so that it is not an optional extra - every new pet owner gets one.

AWL Qld will be giving these to the thousands of people each year who adopt refuge animals. As well pet shops, breeders and AWL Qld will use it to help educate during pre-adoption interviews, or when people inquire about a pet and need some information to help them understand what is involved. Gold Coast City Council is making the resource available through school and Council libraries and for people who are having difficulty managing their pets. Vets can also show it in waiting rooms and provide it to needy pet owners.

A whole community promotion through a the Gold Coast Pet Expo Launch with Dr Harry, media promotion, T-shirts and education in schools is underway to increase awareness of the problem and the solutions. The community is being made aware that through responsible pet ownership, it could be the first city in Australia to end the killing of healthy pets.

Ongoing support for desexing is essential. Peter Marsh an American lawyer, who runs S.T.O.P. (Solutions to Pet Overpopulation) in New Hampshire USA, argues that an aggressive legislation, education and sterilisation strategy has reduced pet overpopulation in America from one in five euthanased thirty years ago, to one in twenty. To get to zero euthanasia, he proposes extension of this model to include a surcharge on pet owners with intact pets that is used to subsidise low cost desexing. He also suggests an emphasis on desexing early to prevent that "oops" first litter because owners did not know how early pets can mature.

AWL offers free desexing to needy individuals through the Desex Fund, and Last Litter Fund that enables the mother cat or dog to be desexed free of charge when an unwanted litter is surrendered.

For the past three years a Pre-spring Desexing Campaign, designed to desex as many pets as possible before they are born rather than animals having to be killed later, has been co-funded by AWL Qld and Gold Coast City Council. It has been supported by an increasing number of local vets offering discounted prices as incentives. Promotion of this Desexing Month through radio, TV, newspapers and letter-box postcards has educated about desexing from two months, that cats can be pregnant by five months and that a pet does not have to have a litter first. This has resulted in an extra 600 desexings each month of the campaign. In its first year, there was a 112% increase in the number of desexing operations performed in August compared with the previous year, with an overflow of bookings having to be transferred into the following month.

A new National Desexing Network (NDN) now exists to link any pet owner who cannot afford desexing with supportive vets. This year NDN promoted the first National Desexing Month in August.

Partnerships between animal welfare groups and animal management departments work well for both. Having the pound and refuge working cooperatively on the same site, enhances the public appreciation of Council's efforts towards animal welfare. AWL Qld rehomes 4000 desexed and microchipped animals a year. The AWL vet clinic on the shared pound/refuge site enables stray and abandoned animals who are injured or sick to be treated immediately. At night AWL provides a 24hr ambulance and veterinary response team. A fully equipped public clinic increases desexing and microchipping and provides veterinary care for many welfare cases. A Pound Release Desex Fund and regular Mad Microchipping Mondays all help achieve both animal management and refuge goals.

The GCCC and AWL Qld school education programs complement each other. GCCC visits Years 1 and 5 featuring safety and responsible pet care, and AWL offers a secondary school 16-hour Companion Animal Certificate Course which involves teenagers coming to the refuge to learn about responsible ownership, handling a range of breeds of cats and dogs - training them, hydrobathing them, doing breed identification activities and learning about which are more suited to certain lifestyles, and how

to care for pets for life. Students access the vet clinics, and observe early age desexing and why it is essential to help end pet overpopulation.

They also learn the laws related to animals - the Animal Care and Protection Act and the Local Animal Management Laws. Being at the refuge getting to know some of the 200 abandoned animals each visit, reinforces their need to be responsible owners.

Stage 4: Review where you are up to and continue the journey – sustain and renew efforts.

I would like to be able to tell you that we have already arrived at the amazing vision described at the beginning of this presentation. So far the euthanasia is down by one quarter in three years. While it's difficult to be patient, we are learning that community change takes time. But at least we have our community involved and a commitment to keep going until we get to zero euthanasia.

As we have just launched the DVD last month, our community change initiative is at a pivotal point. The huge task of sustaining the momentum to involve the whole community in the solution requires on-going promotion and cooperative planning of new laws, desexing, identification and training initiatives as well as working with the local government Planning Department on housing initiatives.

We hope you will join this community change adventure, help broaden the project, and share your experience and expertise. Small is beautiful and community change needs to occur at a manageable level, so if we all work cooperatively towards the same goals in local communities around Australia, we will succeed in achieving a better outcome.

National Summit

To this end, the first National Summit to end Pet Overpopulation on the Gold Coast in 2006 is being planned to involve government representatives, shelter and rescue groups, vets, innovative pet - friendly housing designers and policy makers and as many other stakeholders as possible. It's purpose is to establish what are the main underlying issues, provide practical solutions and set strategic targets at local, state and national levels. We have already invited international speakers to discuss successful coalitions, early age desexing, effective desexing schemes and successful unowned cat programs. One of the planned speakers, Lynne Fridley of Maddies Fund, works in Maricopa County that has 24 cities and towns with a population of three million in the United States. This County's Animal Care and Control opened the first municipal no-kill shelter in the US in 1999. It is aiming to be the first no-kill county in the US.

We are in the process of gathering national speakers. If you have some positive programs for long term solutions to ending pet overpopulation and irresponsible ownership in a way that respects our love of companion animals, please let us know. If you don't wish to present a paper, but definitely want to be part of this Summit, please also let us know.

We look forward to the day when we can be as true to our furry companions as they are to us, when every dog and cat will have a loving appropriately designed responsible home and we will all be much happier and less stressed, including the cats and dogs.

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Joy Verrinder is Animal Welfare League Qld Education and Policy Development Officer working to end the euthanasia of healthy cats and dogs in pounds and shelters in Australia. She has formed a Stakeholder Coalition to work cooperatively on community change to end pet overpopulation and irresponsible ownership at a local level. Hopefully, this will be a model that can be utilised in other places.

Joy has been involved in education for most of her working life, as a teacher and Deputy Principal in secondary schools and also facilitating teacher training workshops in multiple intelligences and thinking skills. She has a Masters Degree in Business Administration and is currently studying Ethics and Governance. She is currently Companion Animal Divisional Representative for Animals Australia, and has been on the board of both Animal Liberation Qld and RSPCA Qld. She has been involved in animal issues for the last twenty-five years.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Studdert, Virginia. "Dispelling the Myths about long-term side effects of early age desexing" in *Early Age Desexing of Puppies and Kittens*, Victoria: Dept of Primary Industries, 2004.

² Mackie, Marvin. "Early Age Neutering: Perfect for Every Practice" in *Paws to Think*, Autumn 2002 Volume 1, Issue 3. www.petsavers.org