

## Shelter shakeup - the outcome

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### Abstract

Between 2002-2003 a number of changes in shelter procedure for dogs were systematically implemented at the Animal Aid Trust, Victoria. Figures were extracted at the end of 2004, when these changes had been stable for a full year and compared with those from 2002. The modification to shelter procedure included: adopting the SAFER behavioural assessment protocol, implementing environmental enrichment, in-shelter behaviour modification to deal with less serious issues and specifically targeting those behaviours that new owners find problematic.

Results have been dramatic, 96% of dogs assessed as rehomeable are being successfully adopted. This is an increase of 25% more dogs being rehomed, in shorter periods of time and with a return rate of only 3-4% i.e. half the rate of returns seen previously. Initially we thought that the assessment might be causing us to euthanase more dogs than previously and that this might explain the improvements. However, the same percentage of dogs is being euthanased after introducing SAFER as before, so the new assessment does not find less animals suitable to rehome but the type of dogs that pass has altered somewhat. The test seems to give the timid & shy dogs a better chance. Reasons for animals being returned have also altered. Currently dogs are being returned for vet health conditions that had not been detected in the shelter and some separation anxiety issues, this contrasts to the aggression and biting issues commonly cited as reasons for return previously.

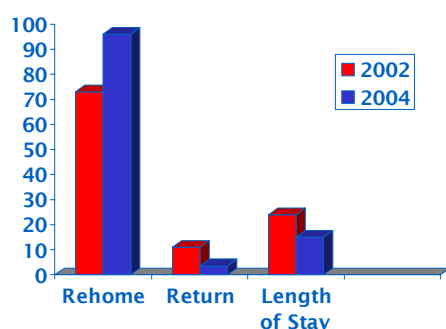
We are currently piloting a post-adoption training program for new owners and their dogs focusing on behaviours that owners have identified as occurring during the first month post-adoption.

### Introduction

The results of the shelter overhaul implemented at the Animal Aid Trust (AAT) Coldstream, Victoria over the last 2 years have been very promising with more dogs successfully rehomed in a shorter period of time. The changes were implemented in a three stage process that took place through out 2003 and included the introduction of a standardized, objective behavioural assessment and the introduction of environmental enrichment and rehabilitative training programs.

During 2002 the shelter used the 8-point assessment protocol, did not utilise enrichment or in-shelter training programs. The baseline statistics for this report were taken from data gathered in 2002, before any changes were implemented, and these are compared with statistics from 2004 which represents the first full 12 month period after these changes were implemented.

**Figure 1: Percentage Rehomeable Dogs**



In 2002, 72% of dogs assessed as rehomeable were rehomed with 11% returned. This represents an effective successful adoption rate of 61%. By contrast in 2004 96% of dogs assessed as rehomeable were rehomed with only 3.5% returns i.e. a successful rehoming rate of 92.5%. This is a substantial improvement. The euthanasia rate during both periods was comparable (20.1% in 2002 compared to 20.6% in 2004).

The behavioural assessment protocol implemented was the Humane Society of the United States SAFER® Test. Dogs are now categorized as A, B or C's. 'A' category dogs are immediately rehomeable, requiring no rehabilitation, dogs classed as B's display minor behavioural issues that respond easily to training, and dogs classed as C's require substantial remedial training dogs. A team of staff and selected volunteers received training in rewards-based strategies that address many of the common behavioural problems observed in shelter dogs, and formed 'The Rehabilitation Team'. Team members concentrate on working with the B & C category dogs. Over the study period 79% of B & C category animals were rehomed, with a return rate of 7.5%. The return rate for these animals forms a large part of the total 3.5% return rate for the shelter but is still lower than the 11% reported in 2002.

In 2004 the dogs were returned for different reasons than those given in 2002. In 2002 many dogs were returned for aggression, biting/mouthing or boisterousness but in 2004 returns occurred primarily because of escapism, separation issues and health problems that had not been detected during the vet check at the shelter. Only one dog was returned for severe dog aggression. This occurred early in the changeover process, when the staff was paralleling the old and new assessment protocols. The dog passed the old test (but failed SAFER®) and was rehomed. It was returned a few months later. Although not specifically measured staff report that timid dogs seem to perform better in the SAFER® test, whereas many dogs failed the 8-point test due to timidity.

Also the time dogs spend in the shelter has been reduced. Whilst the overall length of stay for all dogs has reduced substantially from an average of 22 days, in 2004 category A dogs were rehomed in less than 10 days and category B and C dogs are rehomed in about 17 days (please note this period includes the mandatory 8-day holding period required in Victoria).

Other changes have been reported by staff and management at the shelter, although not formally measured, include improved staff morale, no staff being bitten during the testing (which had occurred reasonably regularly with the 8-point test), and staff acquired a better understanding of individual dogs which helps in matching them with a new family.

In order to perform the test appropriately, staff have to be trained in test administration and scoring. Staff who have formed an attachment to an animal are not allowed to assess that animal. These steps are required to ensure objectivity. The introduction of the new test has resulted in less controversy over outcomes and greater job satisfaction. While not formally evaluated, primarily because we were approaching the issues from an animal welfare viewpoint, informal post-hoc probing suggests that this results primarily from using objective scoring criteria, which means that the outcome is no longer a matter of staff preference or advocacy. Because the test has proven reliability (that is the test gives the same results regardless of who performs test), validity (the test measures what you think you're measuring) and predictive value (indicates how the animal will respond in real life) this means that consistent results will be obtained regardless of who administers the test.

It is useful at this time to state a caveat. Any behavioural test can only provide a limited snapshot of behaviour and can only investigate a small part of the behavioural repertoire. This means that **NO** test can be 100% predictive as learning and environmental factors can and will impact the dog's behaviour post-adoption.

### Environmental enrichment

Pharmaceutical companies maintain dog colonies to test drug effects. These colonies used to keep these dogs in spartan kennel environments, which were easy to keep hygienic and sterile. However dogs kept in this manner displayed abnormal behaviour and this rendered them useless, to test drug action because it was impossible to determine whether the behavioural changes resulted from the drugs administered or from the restrictive kenneling (Beerda et al. 1999; Beerda et al. 1998). Environmental enrichment compensates for the socially and physically restrictive living conditions and enables these dogs to maintain normal behaviour. Unenriched laboratory dogs become boisterous, reactive (often accompanied by repetitive barking) and display increased aggression and stereotypies (repetitive, apparently non-functional motor movements). These behaviours are often manifested by shelter dogs. Notably stereotypies can cause physiological damage to the dog, particularly in the case of acral licking, and are extremely difficult to eradicate once established, therefore it's much better to prevent such behaviour becoming established. Typical shelter stereotypies include licking walls, chasing flies, tail chasing, acral licking or mindless repetitive barking

As part of my research I surveyed new owners, one month after adopting a shelter dog, to establish what problems they experienced with their dogs (Marston, Bennett, and Coleman 2005a). The most commonly reported problems were boisterousness and jumping on people, mouthing, pulling on lead, barking and separation-related issues. Many of these behaviours are similar to those reported in laboratory dogs kept in restrictive environments.

Typically the Codes of Practice (COP) that regulate shelter operations define minimal standards of physical care but they do not consider psychological needs of the animals being kept (Department of Natural Resources and Environment 1998). After the introduction of the changes at AAT all dogs in the shelter received environmental enrichment, were treated in ways to reduce the stress experienced and received basic training such as being quiet, polite through doorways, sitting for their food etc.

Various types of enrichment were implemented including 'In-Run' entertainment such as providing food in Kongs and toys. An attempt was made to roster all dogs for activities out of their run for one hour each day; however this target could not always be met all the time because it is entirely resource dependent. Out of run activities include 'Time Out' which is time spent in runs, away from the noisy kennel area, with a 'green' outlook (which provides movement and stimulation) this allows dogs showing signs of stress to 'chill out'. Sometimes these areas are enriched with scents or small particles of food, which are scattered through them. On very hot summer days, paddling pools are filled with low levels of water and the dogs encouraged to paddle and cool off, sometimes a Kong may be floated, to provide further entertainment. Other activities include walking or training with volunteers in a Dog Activity area. In Victoria, the COP restricts moving dogs off the shelter property therefore the available space has been used to maximum effect by creating a 3-D activity area, with ramps, gateways, stairs, a maze and differing path substrates all make the area more interesting for dogs. It also encouraged volunteers to spend more time with dogs and so provides greater training opportunities. Volunteers are encouraged to take each dog for at least a 15 minute session, so that the dogs can have a real break from the runs. It used to be that volunteers would take as many

dogs for walks as they could in the time available. This resulted in high speed walks that did not allow the dogs time to sniff and often result in further increasing the dog's level of arousal. Now fewer dogs are walked by each volunteer and each receives some calming massage. If dogs cannot be taken out of the run then volunteers spend time in the run massaging or grooming them.

Another form of enrichment is socialization and this is particularly important if dogs are likely to be adopted into a multi-dog household. Adult dogs, if assessed as sociable by staff, are walked in parallel and allowed to interact under close supervision. They are also socialised with people during training, with volunteers who walk or groom them or with the public who are encouraged to move slower through the kennels because of the stories about the dogs that are placed on the kennel gates.

In Victoria the COP requires that dogs be housed singly, unless they are a litter of pups. This is hard on most dogs but particularly so for singleton pups. For puppies any time spent in a shelter is likely to form part of their critically important socialisation period. Also stress experienced during an organism's development has far more dramatic effects than the same stress experienced later in life because it actually reduces the amount of dendritic growth (Sapolsky 1996). This means that the development of the nervous system is impaired and the organism's ability to cope with stress throughout its life is reduced. On the other hand, gentle handling during early development results in many species of mammal becoming better able to cope with stress as adults (Anisman et al. 1998). So puppies at AAT are given priority for available resources and volunteers and staff spend a lot of time gently handling the pups. Pups treated in this manner actively solicit being touched by prospective adopters and obviously enjoy the interaction. It's very hard for anyone not to respond to a small pup who is nuzzles into ones neck. Volunteers and staff report that this is the toughest job in the shelter! Pups are also socialised with sound staff dogs when possible, to better prepare them for post-shelter life,

### Stress reduction

The amount of stress experienced by the dogs was reduced by training staff and volunteers in calming massage techniques (Lund et al. 1999) and increasing their awareness of calming signals (Rugaas 1997) and training staff in using them to calm dogs. We also made some physical changes in the shelter by introducing extra gates to enable dogs to be moved out of sight quickly. Previously dogs might be walked past 15 runs to be taken out for a walk; this resulted in an ever increasing amount of barking and arousal in both the dogs still in their runs and those being walked. This allowed all the dogs to practice unwanted behaviours. Installing the extra gates meant that dogs only needed to pass 2-3 runs before going out of sight. We also tried to reduce the ambient noise as much as possible by not shouting or banging of run gates (Sales et al. 1997). Check chains are no longer used in the shelter and dogs are trained to walk on head-halters or limited slip collars. This is much safer for the volunteers and means that the big dogs are walked by volunteers much more frequently.

Further work is being conducted on the effects of providing post-adoptive training to new owners and their dogs.

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## Linda Marston

Linda is currently completing her PhD in Psychology studying the human-canine relationship. She is particularly interested in the bond between people and their pets and what happens when this relationship breaks down, particularly why people give up their pets and how we can improve the rehoming and retention rates of shelter animals. She has published papers describing her research in scientific literature and has presented her findings both nationally and internationally and in the media.

She is working closely with the Animal Aid Trust in Victoria, to implement world's best practise in their Coldstream shelter and has been working with the RSPCA (Vic) on environmental enrichment and behavioural assessment programs for shelter dogs in their care. She has developed course materials for the Animal Welfare course offered by Monash University and teaches in some of the units. Currently she is compiling data on cat admissions to shelters for the Bureau of Animal Welfare in Victoria.

Linda lives with 2 dogs and 1 cat. She has competed in obedience, flyball and performed with her dogs in various demonstration teams and has been a dog trainer for the last ten years.

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