

Animal hoarding: a recurring animal management nightmare

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Animal hoarding is a serious and aberrant behaviour that has major repercussions not only for the animals involved but also for the hoarders, their family and friends, and the wider community. Public health concerns include the proliferation of vermin and the spread of diseases to humans and other animals (Weiss 2010). Animal welfare concerns are myriad with the animals suffering what has been described as chronic, passive neglect and cruelty (Patronek 2006; Vaca-Guzman & Arluke 2005). Under normal circumstances the relationship between animals and humans is mutually beneficial, whereas hoarding represents an extremely deleterious relationship characterised by comorbid animal and human neglect (Nathanson 2009; HARC 2002).

Most professionals working in animal management are aware of or have seen cases of animal hoarding. Therefore, there is no need for this paper to describe in-depth what the hoarding of animals looks like: the filth; stench; thin, sick and dead animals; faeces and urine everywhere; and utter mess is well known. Squalor is a characteristic of 100% of animal hoarding cases (Frost, Patronek & Rosenfield 2011) and many premises do not have functional utilities (Johnson 2008; HARC 2002).

There is evidence that the number of cases reported annually is on the increase (Ramos et al 2013) but it is likely that the full extent remains unknown as animal hoarders tend to be secretive and reclusive, family and friends fail to understand and report the problem, and intervention is often insufficient (Patronek 1999; Ramos et al 2013). Recidivism is almost always 100% even when intervention is well planned and implemented (Nathanson 2009).

The management of hoarding cases is challenging, complex and fraught with inherent difficulties. It is well recognised in the literature that the management of animal hoarding cases requires the involvement of many people adopting a team approach (Patronek 2001; Patronek, Loar & Nathanson 2006; Cardona 2013; Castrodale et al 2010). This paper examines the challenges of dealing with animal hoarding cases, outlines some of the important considerations when managing cases and makes recommendation for the future. It specifically discusses the hoarding and squalor working party established by the Brisbane City Council under its Homelessness Community Action Plan (action 8), under which an animal hoarding subgroup has been established.

What is Animal Hoarding?

Animal hoarding has been defined as the compulsive collecting of an excessive number of animals that are not provided with even minimally acceptable or appropriate food, shelter and veterinary care (Patronek 2006), and this lack of care is not recognised and completely denied by the hoarder (Johnson 2008). The causes of this condition are still only partially understood and psychologists have posited the consideration of attachment theory, personality disorder, compulsive caregiving and addiction when discussing the development of the condition (Patronek & Nathanson 2009). The recently released DSM 5 manual (2013) includes a disorder named hoarding disorder and suggests that animal hoarding “may be a special manifestation of hoarding disorder” (p.24), although most of the discussion centres on the hoarding of inanimate objects.

Animal hoarding, according to Patronek (2006), and Patronek, Loar and Nathanson (2006), is a far from homogeneous condition and can be roughly divided into three basic types (overwhelmed caregiver, rescuer and exploiter) based on how the hoarder relates to animals and people, how they accumulate their animals, how quickly they relapse if animals are removed and how intensive the intervention has to be. A level of delusion usually exists and the hoarders see themselves as lovers and/or rescuers of animals (Johnson 2008). For hoarders the animals often take on human characteristics and they rely on the animals for emotional comfort (Steketee et al 2011). Self-justifications and excuses abound (Johnson 2008) and in this way hoarders protect a positive self-image (Vaca-Guzman & Arluke 2005). Hoarders may claim to be breeders or running a ‘no kill’ animal shelter (Patronek 2001).

Animal Welfare Considerations

The animals in hoarding cases suffer neglect and cruelty over long periods of time. Many animals are severely emaciated, have numerous health and behavioural problems and suffer chronic deprivation (Vaca-Guzman & Arluke 2005). In many cases dead animals are also found on the premises of hoarders (Berry, Patronek & Lockwood 2005; Avery 2004-2005). The deplorable condition of the animals is denied by the hoarder and no veterinary help is sought. Unfortunately, the best outcome for some of the hoarded animals may be euthanasia (Patronek 2001).

Management Challenges

There are a number of significant challenges when attempting to manage animal hoarding cases.

- A reluctance to tackle the problem is recognised in the literature (Patronek 2001) along with a poor understanding of the condition (Nathanson 2009) and little knowledge among health care professionals about how to treat sufferers (Patronek & Nathanson 2009). Recidivism is extremely high even when treatment is offered (Castrodale et al 2010) confirming the current lack of successful treatment options.
- This reluctance is partially due to the lack of a clear understanding about how to initiate a response, particularly when in most cases hoarders will actively avoid help. Animal welfare laws are one way to initiate action and obtain help for the hoarder and rescue the animals (Patronek 1999); another is to invoke local government animal management laws (Johnson 2008).
- Relying on animal cruelty laws may be problematic, particularly if they rely on 'intent' to define cruelty, or are vague about what constitutes adequate food, water and care (Renwick 2008-2009). Also, cruelty is usually attached to a specific animal, so in a hoarding case there could be literally hundreds of individual cases. Therefore, in most hoarding interventions only a few cases of cruelty are brought (usually to reduce cost). However, this fails to inform the court of the extent of the problem and may result in less than adequate penalties (Renwick 2008-2009). In other cases, the court is reluctant to accept the 'hoarder' label or the involvement of mental health concerns (Berry, Patronek & Lockwood 2005).
- If animals are seized, unless voluntarily relinquished by the owner, they must be held as evidence and this may be for extended periods of time (Renwick 2008-2009; Berry, Patronek & Lockwood 2005; Townend 2013). This is obviously extremely costly. Even if courts mandate recovery of costs the hoarders are often unable to pay. Hoarders sometimes relinquish animals in exchange for more lenient sentences, but this means their problem is not tackled appropriately and recidivism always follows (Berry, Patronek & Lockwood 2005).
- There is an inherent conflict between doing the best for the animals and doing the best for the people (Nathanson 2009; Berry, Patronek & Lockwood 2005). Removing the animals might be the best welfare outcome for the animals, but the worst outcome for the people (Cardona 2013). Sometimes, however, the animals are removed and then euthanased which poses an ethical dilemma for some workers.
- As explained above, a hoarder's identify and self-worth is often firmly tied to the animals they care for and the removal of the animals represents a major trauma to the hoarder (Patronek 2001). Removal of animals over time may be better for the hoarder psychologically; however, concerns for the welfare of the animals may require they be seized immediately. The seizing of the animals is never the end of the problem; psychological treatment and support continue to be needed for a long time (Nathanson 2009; Patronek & Nathanson 2009).
- Considerations of protecting an individual's civil rights may become involved (Vaca-Guzman & Arluke 2005), although less so than with object hoarding (Bratiotis 2011). In many cases the hoarder's premises is not fit for human habitation but there is a reluctance to remove a person from their home which could lead to homelessness and/or place an extra burden on state facilities (HARC 2002). Also, some human related agencies although witnessing the deplorable condition of the animals do not alert the local authorities or shelter for reasons of confidentiality (Berry, Patronek & Lockwood 2005).
- The excuses and justifications hoarders use, and their apparent complete belief in these professed realities, hamper and prevent recovery. The hoarders appear to suffer from a complete lack of insight about the suffering they are causing, the state of their living conditions and the level of neglect of the animals and themselves (Bratiotis 2011). Hoarders avoid accepting that they have a problem (Vaca-Guzman & Arluke 2005). In addition, claims of being animal rescuers or a 'no-kill' shelter may be used as a defence in court (Patronek 2001).
- Hoarders seldom initiate treatment and mandated treatment, unless monitored, does not happen (Patronek & Nathanson 2009). Hoarders are not motivated to seek or receive treatment since they do not perceive they have a problem and usually do not have the funds to pay for it.
- It is often difficult to locate premises where hoarding is occurring because of the reclusive nature of hoarders and the reluctance of friends and family, or other visitors to the premises, to report their concerns. There also appears to be reluctance by various human and animal agencies to cross-report (Patronek 2001; Nathanson 2009). In Queensland, the RSPCA has agreed to report any cases of suspected child abuse (for example, where children are living with hoarders) to the relevant authorities but the cross reporting is not reciprocal due to privacy and confidentiality concerns (Townend 2013).
- Different jurisdictions often handle cases in different ways and with different vigour (Berry, Patronek & Lockwood 2005) and there is often

little communications between jurisdictions. This in conjunction with the secretive nature of hoarders means that hoarders often move jurisdictions to continue their hoarding activities.

- There are health and safety issues to consider during any intervention. Castrodale and her colleagues (2010) present an excellent overview of the health and safety issues that should be considered including the use of personal protective equipment, the risk of zoonotic disease and injuries, and air quality considerations during an intervention.

Successful management

The problems inherent in animal hoarding cases cross boundaries and involve many agencies such as, police, building safety, animal management, animal welfare, public health, mental health, child safety, adult protective services, environmental services, fire safety and so on (Patronek 2001; Vaca-Guzman & Arluke 2005; Bratnotis 2011). Therefore, involving several of these agencies in interventions is resource heavy and costly, as well as time consuming (Patronek 2001; Avery 2004-2005) but nevertheless necessary (Patronek 2001; Cardona 2013). An intervention must consider and include the following:

- A combined approach to all animal hoarding cases, criminal, civil and therapeutic, is usually essential (Johnson 2008). Animal and human services must work together to achieve the best outcome for the people and animals involved. A one dimensional approach only using animal welfare laws will fail to deal with the underlying issues with the person (Patronek, Loar & Nathanson 2006)
- Adult protective services or equivalent must be involved in an on-going way to support the hoarder through the process of animal seizure or down-sizing and on a continuing basis afterwards. Mandated psychiatric and/or psychological treatment must be required and monitored. A case worker must be appointed who will ensure the treatment occurs. This type of monitoring is time consuming and costly.
- For this to occur there needs to be increased understanding of the condition and how to treat it. In the absence of full knowledge of treatment options, clinicians should approach cases without assuming a link with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) and be willing to consider a range of psychological disorders including personality disorders (Patronek & Nathanson 2009). At the same time, clinicians must explore issues of loss, complicated grief, vulnerability, isolation and attachment (Patronek & Nathanson 2009).
- State wide/Australia wide, well-kept and reliable data are essential to identify hoarders and track the movement of hoarders. Despite privacy issues, cross-reporting is necessary to protect the welfare of animals. Animals should not be allowed to suffer neglect and cruelty, and even death because of human concerns for confidentiality or privacy. It could be that a National register be established which lists animal hoarders and their current legal status with respect to animal ownership.
- Prohibition of future pet ownership, at least while treatment is undertaken and success achieved, must be included in any court decision. This prohibition must be monitored and breeches acted on quickly. If/when animal ownership is allowed it must be monitored closely.
- Court-ordered competency evaluations are often necessary. On occasions, however, human health interventions cease when mental incompetency is not confirmed (HARC 2002). Competency and suffering from a mental health problem such as hoarding disorder may not be mutually exclusive, and support for sufferers must continue irrespective of competency.

Brisbane Homeless Action Plan

The Brisbane Homelessness Action Plan arose from the Homelessness Community Action Planning Initiative (2011-13), a partnership between the Queensland Government and the community services sector led by the Queensland Council of Social Services (QCOS). One of the aims of this initiative is to achieve commitment from all key stakeholders to deliver necessary services. The plan is to implement strategies at the local level through working groups.

One such local strategic group was convened under the Brisbane Homelessness Community Action Plan (BHCAP) action 8: Hoarding and Squalor. This working group, co-convened by staff from Brisbane City Council, Communify and Centacare, has brought together a range of agencies involved in hoarding and squalor including Footprints, Mission Australia, Micah Projects, Anglicare, Near North Housing, Australian Red Cross, Burnie Brae, as well as Queensland Department of Communities, Child safety and Disability Services, Medicare Local, Queensland Police and Queensland Fire and Rescue. From the beginning this group decided to include animal hoarding in its remit and so invited RSPCA Qld and Biosecurity Queensland to join.

To specifically deal with animal hoarding under the auspices of this working group, a sub-group has been formed and members with expertise and/or interest in the condition have been invited to join. The subgroup includes representatives from animal welfare (RSPCA), animal management (Local Council), State Government, Academia, and treatment professionals. This subgroup plans to develop a best-practice approach template for identified cases of animal hoarding. This work has begun. A detailed literature search has been carried out and a collation of existing models is currently underway. Some of the findings from the literature and the thoughts arising

from the literature are reported here (above in successful management section and in the recommendations below).

Other Recommendations

- *Increased awareness* It is important that this condition is better understood by all agencies that could be involved in management: by health care workers including general practitioners, social workers and counsellors; by animal workers including veterinarians; by others who come into contact with the hoarder or their family such as teachers, chaplains, meter readers and other council workers; and by the general public. With more public awareness and increased understanding of the condition it is possible that early intervention is more likely (HARC 2002). Increased awareness will also mean that people will know who to contact if they suspect animal hoarding is occurring.
- *Education of court officials* Lawyers and judges need to understand the condition so that they can recognise when they are dealing with such a case and understand the impact the case has on the individuals involved and their family, but also on the animals.
- *Training* All workers who are likely to be involved with hoarders should receive specialist training on how to deal successfully with hoarders. For example, hoarders usually deny there is a problem and debating this issue and expecting sudden insight is useless. There are better ways to communicate with hoarders. Discussing the animals, and their care and love for the animals (despite the condition the animals are in) may be a way to start communication.
- *Reduce officialdom* Hoarders often view the world as hostile (Patronek 2001; Johnson 2008) so officers arriving in official looking vehicles, wearing uniforms and badges are particularly confronting. It is best to plan the approach carefully and it is good if a friend, family member, or known neighbour can accompany the official visitor.
- *Planning* Any intervention must be thoroughly planned beforehand. All relevant agencies must be included and a lead agency appointed for the case. The lead agency must accept the responsibility for the intervention.
- *Research* Contributing psychosocial factors are poorly understood (Patronek & Nathanson 2009) and this probably explains why current interventions and treatments are largely unsuccessful. Further research is essential in this area because better understanding should lead to better treatments.
- *Specific animal hoarding legislation* A specific section on animal hoarding within animal welfare law would acknowledge the seriousness of the

problem and help with some of the challenges listed above. Required inclusions are (Renwick 2008-2009):

- a. Adequate and appropriate definition of animal hoarding
- b. Definition should include all species of animals including wildlife
- c. No requirement for intent to harm
- d. Bonding for seized animals, and if the bond cannot be met, forfeiture of the animals
- e. Cross-reporting requirements between human and animal services
- f. Provisions for early intervention
- g. Mandated psychological treatment of hoarder
- h. Checking of compliance with court ordered treatment
- i. Prohibition of animal ownership in the future unless deemed appropriate by a mental health professional
- j. Interstate reporting

Conclusions

Animal hoarding is a complex and serious problem that can lead to neglect and cruelty to a large number of animals, as well as have severe negative health repercussions for the individuals involved. The repercussions can spread beyond the immediate hoarder to include other family members and the wider community. It is particularly complex because the causes of the condition are poorly understood, hoarders tend to be secretive and therefore are often not identified until the condition is well advanced, many agencies need to be involved if there is to any hope for a successful conclusion, and the laws and treatment options are not specific enough to ensure good outcomes. Recidivism is also reported as extremely high.

This paper has presented the challenges inherent in the management of animal hoarding cases. These include the conflict between animal welfare concerns and concerns for the emotional health and welfare of the hoarders. A focus on one has an immediate detrimental outcome on the other. Hoarders lack insight into their condition and usually deny the existence of a problem. This makes treatment an on-going nightmare as hoarders resist help and treatment, and may just move rather than accept help.

When animal welfare laws are used to initiate action on a case of hoarders and animals are seized, this can lead to major issues for the welfare agency – sometimes animals have to be held for months or years while the case goes through the judicious process. Sometimes, animals are surrendered immediately so they can be re-homed in exchange for

no prosecution. However, this does not help the hoarder or prevent the person reoffending.

The only way to handle cases of animal hoarding to achieve positive outcomes for everyone involved is to adopt a multidisciplinary approach and involve animal agencies along with human service agencies. Animal agencies can manage the animal side of things while the human agencies can support the hoarder through the process of losing the animals and during treatment. A human services agency must agree to be the lead agency, even if the person is to be prosecuted under animal welfare laws. The animal hoarder needs that person to be there for them.

The paper has also presented information about the creation of a specific Queensland working group to look at animal hoarding with the aim of creating a best-practice template to inform the handling of this condition in the future.

Finally, this paper has made a number of further recommendations that over time will help to improve the way this condition can be tackled in a more holistic way. These include the need for a wider awareness and understanding of the condition, and perhaps specific legislation to allow for a better approach to legal cases. An improved willingness to tackle this problem by all agencies will lead to a better outcome for the hoarder, their family and the animals.

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