

VETERINARIANS ROLE IN PRIVATE PRACTICE AND SHELTER MEDICINE: SOLVING THE PROBLEM OF COMPANION ANIMAL HOMELESSNESS TOGETHER

Kate Hurley, DVM MPVM
UC Davis Koret Shelter Medicine Program

INTRODUCTION

Shelter workers, including shelter veterinarians, mainly have contact with an animal while it is in the shelter, and with owners only at the point of surrender or adoption. Community veterinarians have access to an animal (and more importantly, the animal's owner) *before* the animal is given up. As such, the community practitioner potentially has many more opportunities to intervene in the processes that lead to animal abandonment and euthanasia. If community practitioners are aware of the risk factors for breaking of the human-animal bond and relinquishment to a shelter, they will be able to incorporate prevention strategies into their daily practice.

Why do animals come in to shelters, and what can we do about it?

Answering this question for a given community is key to designing an effective intervention strategy. With the advent of computerized record keeping systems for shelters, tracking this information is increasingly practical. Studies in the United States have demonstrated some of the reasons why animals end up homeless.

Preventing lost animals

More than half the animals that enter shelters are strays found on the street. Ensuring that lost animals can be quickly re-united with owners is one of the simplest ways the private practitioner can help relieve the burden on overcrowded shelters. Lost pet prevention should be a part of every preventive health visit.

- **Identification tags and licensing**

- Check that tags are current at every visit
- Have temporary tags available for new clients or whenever a client indicates an address change or vacation plans.
- Sell permanent tags or have mail-in forms available.

- **Microchipping**

- Two types of identification are better than one.
- Promote with every new pet visit and/or procedure requiring anesthesia.
- Make sure local shelter has and uses a scanner

Owner-surrendered animals

Reducing the number of animals given up by their owners may be a little more complex than reducing the number of lost animals. We need to understand why animals are relinquished. Recent studies have in the United States have shed some light on this; however, reasons may vary significantly from one region to another.

Top ten reasons for dog relinquishment in the United States ⁽¹⁾

- 1) Moving, can't find a home that allows pets
- 2) Landlord will not allow the animal in current home
- 3) Cost of the animal's care
- 4) Time required to care for the animal
- 5) Inadequate facilities to house the animal
- 6) Too many pets
- 7) Pet illness
- 8) Personal problem
- 9) Biting
- 10) No homes for puppies

Top ten reasons for cat relinquishment in the United States ⁽¹⁾

- 1) Too many cats
- 2) Allergies
- 3) Moving, can't find a home that allows pets
- 4) Cost of the animal's care
- 5) Landlord will not allow the animal in current home
- 6) No homes for kittens
- 7) House soiling
- 8) Personal problems
- 9) Pet illness
- 10) Inadequate facilities

Some of these reasons are obviously more amenable to veterinary intervention than others. However, it is important to recognize that a general breakdown of the human-animal bond (often due to frustration with behavior) may underlie some relinquishments, even when it is not acknowledged as the primary cause. Strengthening the human-animal bond (increasing the enjoyment and understanding between owners and pets) may therefore decrease relinquishment for reasons that seem unrelated. For instance, it was found that most people who surrendered dogs because they were moving also cited a behavior problem as a secondary reason for relinquishment. It is likely that frustration with behavior makes owners less willing to work through other obstacles to keeping their pets.

Reducing behavioral reasons for relinquishment

When all behavioral reasons for relinquishment were combined, behavior problems were the most common reason dogs were surrendered and the second most common reasons cats were surrendered in the United States.⁽²⁾ Animals surrendered with behavior problems are understandably difficult to place in new homes, making prevention by far the best option. The private practitioner is in an ideal position for early intervention in budding behavior problems.

Common behavioral reasons for relinquishment

<u>Dogs</u>	<u>Cats</u>
Destructiveness/hyperactivity	House soiling (about 40%)
House soiling	Inter-animal problems
Aggression	Aggression
Inter-animal problems	Destructiveness

Other behavior problems cited as sole or contributing reasons to surrender included “disobedient”, “needs too much attention”, “vocalizes too much”, “escapes”, “too active” and “afraid”.

PART I: ROLE OF COMMUNITY PRACTITIONERS

Private practitioner's role: what can you do?

- Recognize that behavior problems can progress to a *life threatening condition*.
- Make behavior history part of every visit.
 - Behavior history forms can be filled out by the client while they are waiting to be seen, and can serve as a quick tool to identify behavioral red flags before. [UCD has downloadable behavioral evaluation forms for [waiting room](#) and [exam room](#) use.]
- For more information, download PDF of lecture on [The Private Practitioner's Role in Preventing Relinquishment](#) by Dr. Sheila Segurson.
- Note that many animals are surrendered for relatively solvable problems such as housebreaking issues.
 - Ask about progress on housebreaking, chewing and other common behavior issues with every puppy and kitten visit
 - Familiarize yourself with crate-training and other techniques to prevent destructiveness

- Promote obedience training and proper socialization at new puppy and kitten visits
 - Remember that poor socialization may be a greater risk in the long run than infectious disease exposure; encourage new puppy owners to socialize with other well cared for animals in relatively safe environments. Do not wait until the completion of the puppy/kitten vaccine series to initiate socialization.
- If you have appropriate facilities and qualified staff, consider making obedience training an option with a “deluxe puppy package”, or partner with a local trainer to provide this option
- Learn about good training and behavior counseling options in your community, and post resources for your clients
- Educate yourself about differentials, prognosis and treatment of common dog and cat behavior problems, and treat or refer as appropriate depending on your talent and interest.

Role of spay/neuter in private practice

Spaying and neutering an animal reduces the risk that it will contribute to shelter euthanasia in many ways: intact animals are more likely to roam and get lost, intact animals are more likely to be given up by their owners due to behavior problems, and of course unwanted offspring directly contribute to overpopulation. In addition to promoting the health and behavioral benefits of spay/neuter at every new-pet visit, veterinarians can contribute to community spay/neuter efforts in many ways.

Low cost sterilization programs

Veterinarians do not need to absorb all the expense for offering low cost spay/neuter surgery. There are many models in which non-profit groups compensate veterinarians for participation in low cost surgery programs, or at least provide supplies and support at no cost to the vet. Low cost, high volume spay/neuter programs can be profitable even without non-profit subsidization. Various strategies have been employed to ensure that people partaking of low-cost programs are those that would not otherwise get the animal altered, so that full-price clients are not taken away from private practitioners.

Pediatric spay/neuter

Although primarily used in shelters to ensure spay/neuter before adoption, there are instances in which early age spay/neuter is indicated in private practice as well. Many unwanted cat litters occur because owners did not realize that cats can reproduce as early as four months of age. Pediatric sterilization bypasses this risk, and many studies have demonstrated the ease and safety of this procedure, which has been routinely used for over 20 years.

PART II: OVERVIEW OF SHELTER MEDICINE

How is shelter medicine different from private practice?

The role of the community practitioner is, ideally, to provide a lifetime of wellness care for pet animals. The contribution of veterinary medicine in shelters, by contrast, focuses on keeping animals healthy for a short but critical time period. Until recently, veterinarians have played a relatively limited and fragmented role in addressing the health problems of shelter animals. When veterinarians have worked with shelters, the focus has often been only on spay/neuter surgery, individual animal health care, or oversight of humane euthanasia. Population-level health care, when it has been addressed at all, has commonly been the responsibility of shelter managers with little or no medical training. However, as an increasing proportion of pet animals come from shelters, veterinarians clearly see the disease impact of such environments. An increased focus upon animal welfare from within and without our profession necessitates a new, more cohesive role for veterinarians in animal shelters. In undertaking this challenge, we equip ourselves to provide a desperately needed service and open rewarding career opportunities for veterinary practice.

What does “shelter medicine” involve?

Shelter medicine, and even surgery, encompasses “herd” health principles as well as individual animal care. Clearly, infectious disease control has great importance in the shelter environment. Ideally, veterinarians need to emphasize *prevention* rather than treatment of infection in animal shelters. Disease prevention encompasses traditional medical practices such as vaccination, parasite control, and nutrition as well as areas less commonly considered in small animal practice, such as air quality, facility design, stress reduction and management of population density.

Even euthanasia of unwanted animals can be approached as a “herd health” problem. Given infinite resources, any single animal could be placed in a home. However, lives are not saved when one animal is placed at the expense of another, only when the overall number of animals placed is increased. Similarly, any individual dairy cow could be kept in perfect health, but if the cost of veterinary services prevents the farm from being profitable, the medical program has not succeeded. Most herds are kept with a purpose, whether that purpose is producing milk and making a profit or finding new adoptive homes for unwanted pets. Limited resources must be allocated systematically to best meet the goals of the whole enterprise. The ideal role of the veterinarian is to assist shelter managers in making sound resource allocation decisions to meet the overall goals of the shelter program.

How can veterinarians work with animal shelters?

Shelter medicine is an expanding area of employment for the veterinary profession. Veterinarians may work as shelter employees or as independent contractors providing services for one or more shelters. Shelter veterinary positions often pay at least comparable to associate positions in private practice, and often have reasonably good benefits. Veterinarians are also employed as shelter directors, consultants to animal welfare agencies and other leadership roles within the sheltering profession. Academic shelter medicine is also a growing and very rewarding field, with internships, residency training and teaching positions in shelter medicine becoming increasingly common. In addition to the usual places where veterinary jobs can be found, listings of shelter veterinary jobs can be found at:

[The Association of Shelter Veterinarians](#)
[The Humane Society of the United States](#)
[American Humane](#)

The big picture: What is happening with shelter medicine today?

Although veterinarians have been working with shelters and homeless animals for many decades, it has only been relatively recently that the formal specialty of “Shelter Medicine” has been acknowledged as a defined area of teaching, research and practice. Since the first shelter medicine class was offered at Cornell University in 1999, shelter medicine as an academic enterprise has expanded greatly. Formal student training in shelter medicine is now offered by at least half of the veterinary schools in the United States. A textbook on shelter medicine was published in 2004, and continuing education programs in shelter medicine are now offered at most major veterinary and shelter conferences in the United States. The Association of Shelter Veterinarians, a worldwide association of veterinarians with special interest in shelter practice, now numbers over 400 members. Scholarly research specifically targeted at improving the behavioral and physical health of shelter animals and reducing the impact of pet overpopulation has become increasingly common. This trend is not limited to the United States: a brief review of the literature revealed published studies regarding shelter animal care in many countries, including Australia, the United Kingdom, Brazil, Spain, Italy, Germany and Switzerland.

Summary

Although the problem of animal homelessness can seem daunting, the reward for successful solutions is great. Millions of lives are at stake: when veterinarians step forward to provide a leadership role in solving this problem, our profession benefits through increased value placed on companion animals; society benefits from reduced economic and social costs of unwanted animals; and most importantly the animals themselves benefit with an improved chance of finding, or remaining in, a lifelong loving home.

1. Salman MD, New JG, Scarlett JM, Kass PH, Ruch-Gallie R, Hetts S. Human and Animal Factors Related to the Relinquishment of Dogs and Cats in 12 Selected Animal Shelters in the United States. *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science*. 1998;1(3):207-226.
2. Salman MD, Hutchison J, Ruch Gallie R, et al. Behavioral reasons for relinquishment of dogs and cats to 12 shelters. *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science*. 2000;3(2):93-106.