Animal Hoarding: A serious welfare issue

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Introduction
RSPCA Qld inspectors are regularly called to investigate properties where suspect neglect and/or cruelty has occurred. Sometimes what the inspectors find is unbelievable squalor where humans and animals are living together under conditions that most people would describe as uninhabitable. Often there is no running water and no electricity connected. Animals are everywhere with faeces and urine adding to the general filth. In the midst of this squalor humans are living sometimes with children and/or dependent elders. The animals are often neglected, starving, diseased and it is even not surprising to find dead bodies. This is animal hoarding.

After being first described in the early 1980’s, animal hoarding was recognised as a condition in 1999 by the Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium (HARC) and has been discussed in the literature in several fields: animal welfare and veterinary medicine, psychology and psychiatry, social work and the law. Most authors agree that it is poorly understood with more research needed particularly in the area of successful intervention strategies. However, what is clearly understood is the seriousness of the condition and the negative repercussions on the hoarders themselves and their families, the animals and the wider community. Veterinarians are often on the front line interacting with people who hoard animals but remain totally unaware of the true situation at the hoarder’s house. This paper presents an overview of animal hoarding and argues that veterinarians have an important role to play in identifying hoarding cases, recognising the early signs in clients that may become hoarders, helping with the treatment of animals seized from hoarding cases and supporting clients as they try to build normal relationships with animals after being identified as animal hoarders.

What is animal hoarding?
Various definitions exist in the literature but there is general agreement that animal hoarding involves the accumulation of an unusually large number of animals, a failure to provide even minimal standards of care for the animals and a lack of recognition that problems exist. Patronek describes it as a pathological human compulsion to “obtain and control animals, coupled with a failure to recognise their suffering” (p.520). Animal hoarders are usually in denial of what is obvious to everyone else.

Dogs and cats are the most common species to be hoarded but cases have been reported with horses and farm animals, rodents and wildlife. The experience at RSPCA Qld supports these reported findings with dogs and cats being the most common species hoarded, but we have also had cases involving rodents, birds and wildlife, and some cases where more than one species are hoarded together.

Squalor is a finding in almost 100% of animal hoarding cases. There is often no running water, electricity or area in the house free of faeces, urine and general filth. In some cases the dwellings are not fit for human habitation. In the majority of cases the animal hoarder also hoards inanimate objects and the dwellings are severely cluttered.

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impacting on the ability to move around and access areas of the house\textsuperscript{3,5}. The hoarding of objects may include food and garbage, adding to the unsanitary conditions\textsuperscript{3}.

It is also important to recognise the scale of animal suffering encountered in animal hoarding cases\textsuperscript{1}. Hoarders often fail to provide any preventative veterinary care\textsuperscript{7} and provide only sporadic other veterinary treatment at best. The recent study of animal hoarding in NSW found that animals in every hoarding case required veterinary treatment and suffered from a range of inflammatory, infectious and nutritional diseases\textsuperscript{4}. In 41.5\% of cases dead bodies were found and behaviour problems of varying severity were reported\textsuperscript{4}. Similar percentages of cases with dead animals have been reported in previous literature\textsuperscript{3}. The three case studies in Belgrade\textsuperscript{6} recorded the body score and physical care of the hoarded animals and found no animals that could be classified as being an ideal weight. The majority were thin or underweight. As far as physical care goes, none were classified as adequate and the majority as borderline, poor or terrible. Again, this is in agreement with experiences at RSPCA Qld.

The poor welfare suffered by hoarded animals has been described as ‘chronic neglect’. But this somewhat benign term hides real suffering, both physical and emotional, of the animals involved. This is demonstrated by the finding in the Victorian study that the commonest reason for euthanasia of seized animals was behavioural problems\textsuperscript{2}. The animals lack normal socialisation with humans and sometimes conspecifics, and are unable to be rehomed.

**Who hoards?**

Anyone can hoard, however hoarders are more likely to be female, middle-aged or older, and be unemployed or on a pension (that is, of lower economic status)\textsuperscript{1,4}. Although many hoarders live alone, some live with spouses, children or dependent seniors.

Hoarding is now recognised as a mental health diagnosis, Hoarding Disorder (HD), which is listed in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5)\textsuperscript{5}. HD also incorporates animal hoarding. The hoarder excessively acquires items (objects or animals) and displays persistent difficulty discarding items, and discarding any or the removal of any causes severe distress\textsuperscript{3}. The hoarder also displays poor or absent (delusional) insight\textsuperscript{5}. This delusional insight means that hoarders deny they have a problem and resist interventions and treatment\textsuperscript{3}. It also means that hoarders are unlikely to seek treatment on their own account which, of course, has important implications for identifying animal hoarders and therefore for the welfare of animals. The distress at discarding means that RSPCA interventions and the seizing of animals is extremely traumatic for animal hoarders.

Hoarders appear to have strong feelings of responsibility towards the animals they hoard\textsuperscript{3}. They often speak of saving the animals or rescuing them. They believe they are the only person who can adequately look after their animals. They express excessive emotional attachment, far in excess of what is expressed by normal pet owners\textsuperscript{3}. Some even go so far as to believe they have a special ability to communicate with their animals\textsuperscript{3}.

Hoarding follows a chronic course and is resistant to treatment. Recidivism has been reported to be as high as 100\%\textsuperscript{4,7}. Psychiatrists and psychologists posit suggestions as

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to why this condition develops and there is a general belief that if it were recognised early enough steps could be taken to help the potential hoarder and prevent its development. A recent study by Ramos and his co-workers demonstrated that people with a large number of cats were more similar to animal hoarders than people with one or two cats in a number of ways, specifically in attachment to pets (Lexington Pet Attachment Scale), anxiety and depression and hoarding behaviour. They argue these people with a large number of cats were in the early stages of developing HD.

Patronek describes three types of animal hoarders but others argue that these ‘types’ should not be seen as necessarily discrete and can co-exist in the one person at the same time or at different times. However, the classification forms a useful guide when considering approaches towards perpetrators. There is also what has been described as the breeder-hoarder which could be argued to belong on a continuum with puppy farms. These hoarders will, from time to time, sell puppies as a way of receiving money but they would never consider allowing the majority of their animals to leave their care. The primary difference between these breeder-hoarders and puppy farmers is motivation. Hoarders are not motivated by commercial gain.

Where do the animals come from?
Most studies report that animal hoarders collect animals from many sources. Some collection is passive with uncontrolled breeding being the commonest in this category. Hoarders may also have a number of facilitators who give them animals in the mistaken belief that they are running a rescue organisation or a shelter. Even welfare agencies may give animals to so-called rescue groups thereby facilitating the disorder. It is possible that veterinarians could also be fooled into giving animals to such bogus rescue groups. This type of passive acquisition only fuels the individual’s belief that they are ‘saving’ animals.

Other acquisitions can be active and include planned breeding, actively seeking animals that are ‘give-away’, attracting animals to the premises through offering food, buying animals and advertising for animals.

Who reports cases?
One of the problems facing welfare agencies with legal animal welfare responsibilities is locating premises where animal hoarding is occurring. Although, as stated above, animal hoarders lack insight, they tend to be secretive and often reclusive. Sometimes family and friends know about the problem but are reluctant to report the case to welfare agencies for many reasons including the knowledge of how upsetting it will be for their family member or friend if the animals are seized. This of course demonstrates concern for the person but ignores the plight of the animals.

Cases are most commonly reported by friends, family members, neighbours or incidental visitors to the premises such as social workers, priests, teachers, general practitioners and so on. The main reason given for reporting is usually suspected cruelty. Veterinarians are also a source of reports of suspected hoarding situations.

In Queensland, the RSPCA has a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Queensland Health to report any cases of suspected child neglect, for example, if we visit a hoarding establishment and see that a child is also living on the premises (squalid, unsanitary etc.) we report it. However, the MoU does not go the other way. If

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health or social workers visit premises and find an excessive number of animals present which they suspect may be in poor condition, they have no obligation to notify the RSPCA. The reason given is to maintain confidentiality to protect the child and parent or guardian. The animals seem to have no right for protection. However, many workers ensure we are notified anonymously.

What role for veterinarians?
As a first step veterinarians must ensure they are not enabling hoarding behaviours. It is important for veterinarians to be able to differentiate genuine rescue efforts from hoarding situations. For example, if veterinarians recommend persons for animal placement, they should consider whether it is necessary to have visited the premises and assessed the qualification of the person to have the animal. Sending food and supplies home with someone claiming to need it for rescue animals may in fact be enabling hoarding behaviour. There is evidence that animal hoarders seek out veterinarians (as well as other people) who work with animals.

Veterinarians are well placed to identify hoarders, both early stage hoarders when intervention may be more successful and established hoarders that should be referred to the RSPCA (or equivalent agency). There are some signs which are red flags that the case may be one of hoarding. These include:

- A different pet brought in each time and often never for a second time
- Pets that are brought in usually have a traumatic injury (such as bite from a dog fight) or an infectious condition
- Animals are presented with conditions that are preventable with adequate care
- Animals are often underweight
- There is no history of routine preventative care such as vaccination or sterilization
- Travelling great distances to visit a veterinarian
- Wanting heroic but futile efforts for a newly acquired animal
- Bathing and perfuming an animal before the visit to cover up odour
- Being unwilling to say how many animals they have
- Claiming to have just rescued an animal that is in a deplorable state – matted hair, underweight, smelling of urine, overgrown nails
- Animal showing signs of confinement such as muscle atrophy
- Trying to get medication for animals at home
- Displaying an obsession with animals and perhaps asking if there are any animals that need homes

There are various steps a veterinarian can take if a case of hoarding is suspected. Initially, the veterinarian should seek to confirm or at least become better informed about the situation. It is useful to try and build trust with the hoarder and question gently about their animals. If hoarding is suspected, it is useful to try to gain information about who else lives with the hoarder (for example, children may be living in unsanitary conditions).

In some jurisdictions it may be a requirement to report suspected cases of child abuse or even animal abuse (and living with hoarding and in a squalid house qualifies). In all cases there is a moral duty to do something. The American Veterinary Medical Association has a policy which encourages veterinarians to report abuse or neglect.

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The Australian Veterinary Association has a similar policy, stating that the veterinarian’s first duty is the animal or animals involved\textsuperscript{10}.

As stated earlier, early intervention may help potential hoarders to receive the help they need\textsuperscript{8}. All veterinarians know people who have a larger number of animals than usual and it is essential these situations are monitored closely, trust established and a good understanding developed about the number of animals in the home and the condition in which they are kept. In the early stages people may be prepared to seek help and they may listen to their veterinarian as a person they trust and respect.

The laws around animal cruelty and neglect differ in different jurisdictions, and the body(ies) responsible for investigating cruelty and neglect also differs. Therefore, veterinarians need to be aware of the situation in their state or country. It would be useful for veterinarians to develop a working relationship with the investigating body to increase their understanding of how a case would proceed and to what extent they could and would be involved\textsuperscript{1}.

Veterinarians may feel some reluctance to report suspected cases of hoarding\textsuperscript{1}. They may feel that there are confidentiality concerns; they may not want to be involved, or seen to be involved, in legal proceedings; they may fear retaliation; they may think their practice will suffer negatively; and, they may genuinely wonder if the legal route is in the best interest of the animals and persons involved. Some of these concerns can be addressed through a better understanding of hoarding itself, the investigation process and what the likely outcomes will be. A good working relationship with the investigation agency, as discussed in the previous paragraph, will also help.

In contrast, some veterinarians may be interested in being more involved in cases: helping with the rescue and treatment of animals, collecting evidence, appearing as an expert witness, and supporting the client throughout the process and afterwards\textsuperscript{1}.

**Intervention**

Treatment and intervention strategies are complex and in many cases do not result in lasting improvement (thus the high recidivism rates)\textsuperscript{7}. A taskforce approach is best\textsuperscript{1} with the taskforce drawing members from many agencies including animal welfare, police, animal management, housing, environmental control and mental health. An important consideration is that animal welfare agencies, which are often the agency taking a lead role in such cases, focus on the animals and their welfare. They will take the course of action that is best for the animals. This action, particularly if it involves seizing the animals, may not be the best approach from the perspective of the hoarder and be extremely stressful for them. Other agencies must be present to care for the hoarders.

An education approach is often tried by animal welfare agencies to tackle animal hoarding cases. However, such an approach is helpful in a limited number of cases. A legal course of action is often the approach that has to be adopted to protect the animals involved. How this occurs depends on the animal welfare law in the particular jurisdiction\textsuperscript{2,4}. There is no state in Australia which recognises animal hoarding as a specific offence\textsuperscript{4}, leaving other charges to be brought which may fail to present the full extent of the situation to court. The best outcome should probably include mandated treatment orders (possible now that HD is recognised in the DSM-5) and a ban on hoarding.

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owning animals for a number of years, if not a lifetime ban. This sort of outcome would be easier to achieve if animal welfare law recognised animal hoarding as a specific offence and the number of animals involved in the offence could be told to the court.

**Conclusion**
Animal hoarding must be viewed as a severely dysfunctional behaviour with public health and animal welfare consequences. There is some evidence that it is growing in frequency as older people become more isolated from family support systems. It could also be that people in general are becoming more aware of the problem and reporting cases. Any increased awareness should be viewed as a positive development as reporting leads to animals being removed from situations of neglect and in many cases finding loving homes, and the hoarders themselves receiving necessary treatment for their mental health disorder.

However, barriers to resolution still exist due to a lack of understanding in the community and cases go unreported for too long leading to real animal suffering.

Veterinarians are in a prime position to play a key role in animal hoarding cases. Veterinarians are often the first person outside of the family to suspect hoarding is occurring. They may recognise hoarding tendencies (caring for large number of animals, for example) or actual hoarding cases, they may report cases to relevant authorities, they may help with rescued animals and they may be expert witnesses. As the Australian Veterinary Association states in its policy¹⁰, veterinarians' first duty is for the welfare of animals and their duty of care extends to preventing future abuse. It is for this reason that veterinarians should report suspected cases of hoarding.

Veterinary courses should include information specific to animal hoarding to prepare veterinarians to be alert for this serious situation. As a young graduate, I had no knowledge of such a thing as animal hoarding and was ill-prepared for my first case. This situation is improving as information on animal hoarding is being presented in some university veterinary courses around Australia. This topic should also be covered in other university courses to prepare other professions such as doctors, social workers, psychologists and ministers for future animal hoarding cases.

**References**


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