

What to do about unwanted dogs and cats

Executive summary

The problem of unwanted dogs and cats is an ongoing challenge for Australian governments and communities at all levels.

The policy advice of the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) about this issue is based around a framework of five key principles. The most effective way to make an impact on the problem of unwanted companion animals is to employ strategies across all five principles that are appropriate to the situation in each state or local government area.

The five key principles are:

1. **Understand the problem** – make sure there is sound information about what is causing unwanted dogs and cats in the relevant jurisdiction.
2. **Education** – education about socially responsible pet ownership is a powerful strategy. Public education about how to react to stray cats is also important (ie don't feed them, but either take ownership or take them to a pound).
3. **Identification** – microchipping or other identification for all pets is vital to ensure that lost animals can be returned to their owners.
4. **Targeted programs** – strategies to address specific problems in local jurisdictions have often been shown to be effective. These might include low-cost desexing if desexing rates are low, or public education about the best way to deal with stray neighbourhood cats. Providing adequate resources is absolutely crucial.
5. **Increase regulation, compliance and enforcement for all sources of companion animals** – controls and compliance to limit the risks of overpopulation are important components. Ensuring enough resources are allocated to enforcement is vital for new regulations to have any effect on euthanasia rates.

Background

The euthanasia of dogs and cats is a highly emotive issue, one which animal activists and politicians alike use to rally support around their respective causes. Veterinarians and veterinary nurses are equally disturbed about the number of animals entering and dying in pounds and shelters across the country. Many of them working in shelters are the ones who have to perform such euthanasias.

Unfortunately, many of the opinions and policy 'solutions' to the problem are poorly informed about both the problems, and the strategies that have been effective against them in the past. This means that taxpayers' money is invested by local and state governments in initiatives that will not have a significant impact on the problem they are intended to solve. Responsible pet owners are often required to spend more money on their pets due to increased regulation. And dogs and cats continue to be

euthanased, eliciting the outrage of animal organisations who call for solutions that may not be based on scientific evidence or been proven to work.

The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) is the peak representative organisation for veterinarians in Australia. It advises governments at all levels on the range of policy issues relating to animal health and welfare. The AVA provides policy advice to governments based on the best scientific evidence for effectiveness.

This document provides a framework for the association's advocacy and communication activities around unwanted companion animals. The framework is firmly rooted in AVA member-approved policy.

Framework of five principles

On the issue of unwanted companion animals, the association's advice is structured around a basic framework of five key principles.

The most effective way to make an impact on the problem of unwanted companion animals is to employ strategies across all five principles that are appropriate to the situation in each state or local government area.

1. Understand the problem

In each jurisdiction, the reasons vary as to why animals end up in shelters or being euthanased. In most cases, there will be several causes.

Research has found that most dogs ending up in pounds are owned, and most have been surrendered by their owners. This is usually because of behavioural problems, though a change in the living situation of the owner is also a common reason.¹

With cats, the majority of those ending up in at the pound are not owned, being either stray or feral animals. A Victorian university study found that 80% of cats entering three major shelters had no owners or were semi-owned.²

With both cats and dogs, behavioural and health problems they bring with them to the pound often make them unsuitable for rehoming. This is especially the case with animals rescued from animal hoarders and others who house multiple animals in sub-standard conditions. Many of these animals have to be euthanased due to poor health or behaviour that's unsuitable for a domestic pet.

There are important differences in the situations of unwanted cats versus dogs. With cats, there are significant problems with feral animals, and colonies of stray cats in urban areas. These problems require different responses to those that cause dogs to end up in a pound and being euthanased.

Other factors leading to animals arriving at the pound or shelter include the surrender policy of the shelter, local veterinary capacity, human demographics, enforcement and education policies, and even climate (as it affects the breeding season of cats).

¹ Salman, MD, New Jr, JG, Scarlett, JM, Kass, PH, Ruch-Gallie, R and Hetts, S (1998) Human and Animal Factors Related to Relinquishment of Dogs and Cats in 12 Selected Animal Shelters in the United States, *J App Animal Welfare Sc* vol 1(3) 207-226.

² Marston, L, Bennett, P and Touhsati, S (2006) Cat admissions to Melbourne shelters: a report to the Bureau of Animal Welfare, December 2006. Melbourne; Animal Welfare Science Centre, Monash University.

2. Education

Education is a powerful complement to other strategies to address unwanted animals.

All new pet owners need to understand their obligations and the needs of their pet. This is best handled by requiring all sources of animals to provide standard information on health care, training and feeding requirements.

The exact educational needs will probably vary slightly from place to place, but the basics of socially responsible pet ownership and the right way to deal with stray cats are standard requirements. A study in Victoria showed that people feeding semi-owned cats was a significant problem² and a campaign was introduced to educate the public. It raised awareness that feeding a cat that wasn't yours only contributed to the problem, and encouraged people to either take ownership of the cat or take it to a pound or shelter. In some areas where desexing rates are abnormally low, owner education on its benefits can be very effective.

There is a particular need to educate owners about how to train and socialise their pets while very young, to avoid behavioural problems later on that result in relinquishment or strays.

3. Identification

Identification of owned animals is crucial. Lost animals can be quickly returned to their owners, and it's clear which animals are not owned. Compulsory microchipping and registration have been effective, although there is not always a high level of compliance.³ Funding initiatives to increase compliance can be a cost-effective way to reduce euthanasia rates.

There are a number of other ways to identify pets - collars and tags can help return lost animals without the need for microchip reading equipment, and can be read by a neighbour who may be able to return the animal to the owner without having to go to a shelter or pound.

4. Targeted programs

Once the cause of the problem is understood in any particular community, targeted programs can be designed to address them.

There is a high level of voluntary compliance with desexing in owned animals – 93% for owned cats and 78% for owned dogs.⁴ Voluntary desexing has effectively managed population growth for owned animals in Australia. Existing research has shown that euthanasia in pounds and shelters is rarely because an owner has too many animals.⁵

For example, a Victorian study found 21% of cats entering the state's three largest shelters were owned and the rest unowned or feral. Only one-third of the owned animals were surrendered because of overpopulation. A targeted program

³ Garrett, M (2006) Compulsory microchipping in New South Wales. In: Urban Animal Management Conference Proceedings 2006. Sydney: Australian Veterinary Association.

⁴ Heady, B (2006) National people and pets survey 2006, Melbourne: Petcare Information and Advisory Service.

⁵ Lawrie, M and Awad, M (2007) The issue of unwanted animals: an unemotional approach? In: Australian Institute of Animal Management Conference Proceedings 2007, Canberra: Australian Institute of Animal Management.

to address the problem of unowned or feral cats would be the way to reduce in euthanasia rates in this instance.⁶

For these reasons, mandatory desexing is not supported by the AVA to control populations as it will not have any significant effect on controlling feral and unowned cats. This means that money and effort spent on promoting and enforcing mandatory desexing would be more usefully expended elsewhere.

Targeted voluntary desexing programs in areas where there is an unusually low compliance with voluntary desexing can be an effective strategy to reduce unwanted animals in particular communities, especially when complemented by a targeted education program.⁵

Other targeted programs might address problems with unscrupulous breeders or animal hoarders if these are found to be a particular source of euthanased animals.

Better systems can improve the adoption rate of animals, and reduce the rate of return. Improved assessment of the animal, potential owner and his or her home is one example. Expanding supply channels to responsible non-shelter outlets is another. Transporting suitable animals for adoption to areas of high demand and low supply has also shown to be a promising strategy.

It's important to remember that many animals in pounds and shelters are not suitable for adoption. An analysis of RSPCA's Yagoona shelter in Sydney showed that 98% of dogs destroyed during 2004-05 were unfit to be rehomed due to poor health, old age or unsuitable temperament. Eighty-nine per cent of cats euthanased were also unfit for adoption.⁵ Effective solutions to the euthanasia of unwanted companion animals have to include comprehensive preventive strategies that stop the animals arriving there in the first place.

Governments at all levels need to allocate adequate resources to the control of unwanted cats. This includes education on what to do about unwanted or semi-owned cats, along with resources to deal with cats that are relinquished. Feral cats are a major danger to wildlife. Although there's no simple way to control them, various methods are being researched and should be promoted.

5. Increase regulation, compliance and enforcement for all sources of companion animals

Standard, enforceable regulations for breeding, keeping and selling companion animals are vital to reduce impulse buying, poor animal welfare outcomes, and euthanasia rates. These should be applied equally to pet shops, registered breeders, backyard breeders, pounds, shelters and animal rescuers. Providing standard, accurate information to purchasers on the health, feeding, behavioural and training needs of their new pet is an important part of this.

All sub-standard facilities breeding or housing animals for sale should be closed down permanently.

Governments at all levels need to be committed to enforcing these regulations, not just rely on not-for-profit organisations.

⁶ Marston, L, Bennett, P and Touhsati, S (2006) Cat admissions to Melbourne shelters: a report to the Bureau of Animal Welfare, December 2006. Melbourne; Animal Welfare Science Centre, Monash University.

Conclusion

The euthanasia of unwanted companion animals is a complex issue. Only a range of complementary strategies can achieve the objective of reducing the euthanasia rate of unwanted cats and dogs. These strategies must be:

- based on a sound understanding of the local situation
- supported by well-researched evidence for effectiveness, and
- adequately resourced to evaluate their effectiveness.

The five key principles provide a strong framework for dealing with unwanted companion animals in an effective and coordinated way.