

Pets or pests? The future of companion animal ownership

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The future of companion animal ownership in Australia

Dr Hugh Wirth, President, RSPCA Australia

From the earliest of times humans have kept animals as pets. A fascination with other living creatures and a desire to possess them remain to this day the underlying reasons for humans to keep pets.

The last century has seen the establishment of animal shelters for stray animals, the development of dog control legislation and an increase in the importance of pet ownership. Through a greater appreciation of the human-companion animal bond, the concept of Responsible Pet Ownership has evolved and scientific research has established the positive effects of pets on humans' mental and physical health.

As there is a shift towards single person households and an ageing population, it is predicted that pet ownership will increase. The effects of modern urban lifestyle on pets and the ability of pet owners to provide an adequate environment for them have yet to be properly understood and addressed. Many people new to pet owning will lack the basic background in the husbandry and behaviour of the animal they choose as a pet. Who will look after the animals made victims by these circumstances?

The animal welfare movement must now demand that only sufficient numbers of suitable and sound companion animals to meet community requirements are bred; that control laws address all of the principles of responsible pet ownership; and that disposal of unwanted animals includes re-housing programs as the top priority with humane killing as a last resort.

The animal welfare movement must engage state and local government authorities intelligently to ensure that laws encouraging the proper control of dogs and cats are reasonably well enforced, and that amenities are comfortably shared by pet-owners and non-owners alike. Division within the animal welfare movement is counter-productive. All animal welfare societies need to engage in national and international debate on the complex goals of the animal welfare movement and how best they might now be achieved.

Companion animal management laws must contain the fundamental requirements of licensing of individuals wishing to own companion animals. The laws must be structured to ensure that the companion animal owner is fully accountable for all breaches. They should also include provisions for pre-purchase registration (with a financial rebate for desexed animals), desexing, identification of animals through microchipping and veterinary health certification.

These laws must not only elevate the status of pet ownership but acknowledge the role of companion animals in our communities and the need to manage them responsibly. They must also take management and responsibility squarely to the dog and cat breeding industry, including backyard breeders, and all of those who profit from pet ownership and regulate this through a standardised Code of Practice for the industry.

Influences on pet ownership

Tony Cooke, Pet Care Information and Advisory Service

Pet ownership is an integral facet of our lives as Australians. As a society, most of us have been associated with a pet at some time in our lives, and we wouldn't want it any other way.

Australian society is dynamic. No longer does it have the image of the "1960's" where society was largely made up of the family with the house in the suburbs, large backyard, kids and pets etc. The fabric of society is changing rapidly, with higher populations of singles, couples with two incomes and no kids and the empty nesters as the "baby boomers" age. As society changes do the populations of pets change also?

Pets contribute more than a simple lick, pat and wag. We receive social, psychological, health and financial benefits from our four legged friends. The pet care industry has become a major contributor to the national economy to the value of \$3.3 billion dollars annually and also employs over 37 000 people directly and indirectly.

Aside from the economics, pet owners would argue that pets offer us so much more. They offer companionship, a vector for meeting people, an exercise stimulus, they teach our children responsibility; they give pleasure, love and are loved in return. Recent research even shows that they even improve your health. Pets are good for you!

By improving health pets translate into enormous savings in the health budget. This has been estimated at \$2.2 billion per year. Why then are bans and restrictions making it more difficult to own pets?

Pet ownership has evolved from the mid 1900's. 95% of us are more responsible as owners, more accountable for our pet's actions and less tolerant of poor behaviour of pets. A joint effort by the Welfare organizations, the Veterinary profession, the Pet Care industry and the Australian Companion Animal Council has promoted responsible pet ownership and helped domestic animals evolve into Pets and not pests.

So the predictions for pet ownership in the future.... As our lifestyles keep changing, and our understanding our animal companions improve, we can hope that pets will remain an integral source of pleasure in our Australian lives.

We know one thing will always stay the same.... The mutual Love, Loyalty and Companionship.

Why animals are surrendered and what can be done to reduce surrender rates

Dr Robert Stabler, Stabler Behaviour

Between April 1998 and October 1999, 1826 pet owners including 454 cat owners and 1372 dog owners were asked to fill out a surrender questionnaire form containing 30 questions when they surrendered their pet. Some of the trends reported below may be biased due to the fact that not all the questions were completed by all the owners.

Pets were more likely to be surrendered by a man; who was over the age of 50; a pet they had kept for less than one year; had obtained free of charge from a friend; the pet was fed a commercial diet; the yard was fenced and the owner had obtained professional advice prior to surrender.

Surrendered Cats were more likely to be female, black and white in colour and under three months of age. They were more likely to be surrendered (in descending order of prevalence) because owners had too many animals; pet was sick or too old; owner was moving house or had a rental difficulty; nuisance behaviour; the general maintenance costs were too high or aggressive behaviour.

Surrendered Dogs were more likely to be entire males; blue/red Cattle Dog or their crosses; under one year of age; been vaccinated in the last year, wormed recently and were registered. They were more likely to be surrendered (in descending order of prevalence) because the pets were too old or sick; owners were moving house; escape behaviour; aggressive behaviour; owners had too many animals; barking behaviour or small yard.

Interrupting the surrender cycle needs compassion; understanding; breadth of knowledge and twenty years of experience (classic job ad)!

Educational Opportunities for new owners, problem pets and general health and welfare advice must be proactively sort.

Surrender Interviews will help to ascertain the real reasons behind pet dumping and whether remedial therapy or rehoming is best.

Referral Network of competent pet behaviour counsellors and foster carers is a vital.

Staff Training and Support are crucial. Staff should have accreditation / qualifications in the area in which they work eg grief counselling, pet handling, pet behaviour modification.

Behaviour Assessment of surrendered animals needs to be performed on at least three occasions (eg days 1, 4, 7) by three different, appropriately qualified staff.

Rehabilitation Programs to modify previous behaviour problems can integrate with daily routines of a busy shelter. These are based on understanding the genetic building blocks (species, breed, gender, character); how an animal's personality potential is affected by learning / experience (socialisation, owner pet experience, training) and what social (people, animal) and physical environment (small yard, exercise opportunity) the pet is exposed to.

Trained Volunteers or foster carers must display the appropriate skills, knowledge and attitude eg Recognition of Current Competency principles as per Rural Training Council of Australia.

Shelter Design and Protocols must be a shining example of good human-pet relationships (gentle training methods / handling, daily grooming, twice daily exercise); environmental enrichment

(chew toys, playtimes, multiple exercise and play areas with obstacle courses) and hygiene (no 'wet pets', disease transmission prevention). I suggest that a mentally healthy pet is a physically healthy pet that is more resistant to disease.

Early desexing is an essential part of any pet overpopulation reduction strategy. Roaming entire male pets may cause reactive barking, community health concerns, disease dissemination and unwanted pet pregnancies.

Adoption Interview ensures appropriate Owner–Animal Matching. Determining owner commitment (finances, roster, contingency planning); responsibility (health, welfare, legal) and relationship desires (lifetime, interactive) assists in placing the right animal with the right owner – the 'eyes wide open' philosophy.

Neutral Territory Introduction, bringing existing pets into to meet the newcomer, ensures a smooth transition from shelter to loving home.

Premise Inspection especially for medium-sized dogs provides authentication of yard security and provision of environmental enrichment opportunities.

Compulsory Education Course for New Owners would prepare owners for the settling-in period; teach dog and cat 'First Principles' and building relationship bonds through understanding pet behaviour – Puppy Preschools and Kitty Kindies.

Feedback Monitoring of newly placed pets at one and four weeks would help minimise potential pet behaviour problems and reduce relinquishment.

Improving rehoming and reducing euthanasia - how to market homeless animals

Peter Barber, Chief Executive Officer, RSPCA Victoria

Shelters provide sanctuary to lost, dumped, frightened, and injured animals and provide the opportunity for those animals to be reunited with their owners. In 1999/2000, 117,689 stray/lost/abandoned dogs and cats were received into RSPCA shelters across Australia and only 15,300 dogs and 1,600 cats were reclaimed. Clearly, we have to reduce the number of dogs and cats entering shelters and improve our ability to reunite strays with their owners.

It is important for stakeholders to pressure state and territory governments to become part of the problem-solving process. We must have pet animal management laws applied to all shelters, breeders and pet shops uniformly and include the promotion of responsible pet ownership and require determined efforts to return lost pets to their owners.

Currently, it is too easy to acquire dogs and cats, to give them as presents or to dump them. To encourage more responsible and committed pet ownership we should require pre-purchase standards such as desexing, microchipping, vaccination, temperament and breed testing and completion of registration papers. Everyone seeking to buy a pet dog or cat should be required to complete a simple questionnaire answering questions relating to care and management of the animal.

Unfortunately there will **always** be surplus animals in a shelter which have no future due to health and behavioural reasons and need to be humanely euthanased by veterinarians. It is also cruel to keep dogs and cats penned for long periods and so, due to oversupply, they have to be euthanased. More efficient and exciting marketing of animals suitable as pets must be found and used.

So what are some solutions to enable the rehoming of more animals and reduce the need for euthanasia in our shelters? To rehouse animals requires facilities that provide adequate care for animals and are also accessible and presentable to the public. As well, shelters should advertise the fact that they have healthy and well-cared for animals for sale at a range of ages. Animals in RSPCA shelters have been wormed, rehabilitated, vaccinated, socialised, temperament tested (using nationally approved and accredited testing procedure) and are sold with a money back guarantee once they have been desexed and microchipped. Innovations should include programs such as the supply of kittens for sale from approved veterinary clinics and the implementation of immature desexing. Applying these principles at the new animal welfare centre in Victoria has resulted in increased reclaims and sales and reduced euthanasia rates which is extremely encouraging.

For information on the routine conduct of a shelter including documentation of all the procedures and protocols followed by RSPCA Victoria will soon be available.

Tracing lost pets: is microchipping working?

Dr Ted Donelan, Australian Veterinary Association

There is a need for better systems of identification of companion animals and their owners for both tracing lost pets and managing urban animals. Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) technology ("microchipping") has become accepted as the preferred form of identification for dogs and cats, offering permanent identification anywhere pets may go at any time of their lives. We have the technology, but lack coordinated national standards and systems. This presentation explains the technology and outlines the basic principles that need to be followed to establish an efficient RFID system that acts to maximize the twin objectives of animal recovery and urban animal management. There will be discussion of the NSW and South Australian schemes and recent decisions made by the Urban Animal Management movement.

Effective electronic identification of animals is dependent on the integration and control of four essential elements - the microchip implant; the reader (scanner) network; database operation and management; and operating procedures for implantation and scanning. Microchips cannot link animals and owners if all these aspects are not adequately addressed.

RFID is a national concern and a national perspective must be maintained at all times, particularly with regard to technologies used. Earlier technologies created problems because of inherent incompatibilities, and the move is now to products complying with the International Standards Organization (ISO) standards ISO 11784 and ISO 11785. The transition has to be handled carefully, and the significant numbers of dogs and cats implanted with earlier non-ISO technologies must be acknowledged and protected.

The implanted microchip must cause no harm and must be durable enough to function for the life of the animal. Both microchips and readers must meet defined performance standards.

To ensure readability of implanted devices, a comprehensive network of compatible readers must be installed in all places where dogs and cats are handled. These scanners must be ISO-compliant multireaders that are able to read both ISO microchips and all types of the earlier non-ISO microchips used in Australia. Once the network of these scanners is in place, ISO-compliant microchips should be used. However, it is imperative that existing technologies be used until the reader network has been upgraded to ISO capability. This is the first priority.

The database registry plays a central role in all aspects of access, management, security and accountability of electronic identification systems, and control of registry function is critical. Proper registry management is the only assurance of uniqueness of microchip numbers via the management of records of transponders in the country and audit trails of implanted devices. The registry is the guardian of the system, where problems and failures will be detected

To ensure maximum effectiveness there must be strict adherence to defined operational procedures and protocols for implantation of devices, recording of information and scanning procedures. Identification and listing in the database system must be for the life of the animal.

Given that to date Australia does not have national RFID standards, it is imperative that user stakeholders such as the AVA, RSPCA, pet owners and local government work together with regulators to develop a framework of standards and systems that will work across Australia.

Properly designed RFID systems will vastly improve our ability to trace lost pets. They will save money, save lives and yield a wealth of information about many aspects of pets and pet keeping. The result will be improved animal welfare and animal management outcomes.

Tail docking and other controversial practices

Dr Deb Kelly, South Australian Department of Environment and Heritage

Some non-therapeutic surgical procedures have been performed on dogs for centuries, others have appeared more recently. Probably the most common today are: tail docking; removal of dew claws; ear cropping and pinking; debarking and to a far lesser extent, body piercing

Ear cropping and pinking

Any breed of dog that is traditionally shown with cropped ears has been used for fighting at some time in its history. Ears provide anchor points so are a distinct disadvantage in a dogfight. Fighting dogs had their ears cut off as small pups. This evolved into cropping. Dog fighting was banned in the United Kingdom in 1889 and is prohibited in all States of Australia. However, it is still widely practiced in Asia and, to a lesser extent, in the Americas. With the decline of this “sport”, fewer breeds, throughout the world, are routinely cropped for show. Ear “pinking” is a residual fashion occasionally practiced in the United States which developed from cropping. Pinking involves cutting the ear edge in a serrated manner - similar to pinking shears on cloth. This procedure is purely cosmetic. Pinked ears would be of no benefit to fighting dogs. However, it illustrates how a practice that was initiated for practical purposes has become purely cosmetic. Cropped ears stand upright and make the dog look more alert and more ferocious - characteristics, which are desirable for showing and for guarding respectively. Ear cropping and pinking always require anaesthesia.

Tail docking

Tail docking probably began in a single location in the British Isles or Western Europe and was adopted by that country’s trading partners and the British colonies. It is common in Terriers and Gun Dogs and unusual in other breeds. The origins of the practice are almost certainly based on the use of dogs for hunting and fighting in all their various forms. There is no requirement for any Australian show dog to be docked but the frequency of the practice in this country illustrates its acceptance within the Dog Fancy and the community in general. Though some of the arguments for docking do retain validity, the inconsistencies illustrate that the primary reason for docking tails is tradition and appearance. Tails are docked without anaesthesia in very young pups and with anaesthetic for practical and cosmetic reasons in older dogs.

Dew claw removal

Like tail docking, there is no show requirement to remove dewclaws. In some breeds, the show standard demands dew claws, or even double dew claws are present. They are frequently removed in working dogs because if loosely attached, they tend to tear. In some cases, the nail grows around and cuts the toe or leg. Dewclaws are removed from pups without anaesthesia on a routine basis and from older dogs under anaesthetic where there is an established need.

Debarking

Debarking is the surgical destruction of the vocal folds of the larynx causing the dog to bark with a reduced volume. It is commonly performed in highly populated areas or in response to complaints from neighbours about the dog barking. Some breeds bark more than others so some breeders will routinely debark puppies prior to sale in the urban area. Obviously, the procedure is always performed under anaesthetic.

Body piercing

In the same way that people often have their children's ears pierced, it became a fad a few years ago for the wealthy to have their dogs' ears pierced. This has not gained popularity amongst the mainstream community but tends to be restricted to a few individuals who wish to make a statement through their dogs. It is most common in toy dogs – some people even choose diamond ear studs for their pets.

Inherited disorders in companion animals - what is and can be done to overcome this problem

Dr Paul McGreevy, Faculty of Veterinary Science, University of Sydney

This paper reviews the history of the establishment of breeds, summarises current health and resultant welfare problems and makes some positive suggestions for their resolution. Some breed standards and selection practices run counter to the welfare interests of dogs, to the extent that some breeds are characterised by traits that may be difficult to defend on welfare grounds. Meanwhile, little selection pressure seems to be exerted on some traits that would improve animal welfare and produce dogs better suited to modern society. Unfortunately, the incidence of certain inherited defects in some breeds is unacceptably high while the number of registered animals of certain breeds within some countries is so low as to make it almost impossible for breeders to avoid mating close relatives. There are several constructive ways to overcome these challenges. Breed associations can ensure that reduction of welfare problems is one of their major aims; they can review breed standards; they can embrace modern technology for animal identification and pedigree checking; they can allow the introduction of “new” genetic material into closed stud books; and they can encourage collaboration with geneticists in identifying and using DNA markers for the control of inherited disorders. There should be a concerted effort to produce and evaluate as pets first-cross (F1) hybrids from matings between various pairs of breeds. At the same time, geneticists must learn better to communicate their science in a language that non-geneticists can understand.

In a bid to address the need for more information on inherited disease, we have designed a web-site for on-line prevalence reporting of diagnoses in animals. The aim of this initiative is to collect representative data on trends in the prevalence of diagnoses of behavioural and inherited disorders in dogs. Further we aim to deliver on-line real-time reports of trends in the prevalence of these diagnoses to the veterinary profession, breeders and potential puppy purchasers.

The web-site is being designed that presents a simple questionnaire with categorised clicking opportunities for veterinarians to record diagnoses in micro-chipped dogs on a regular basis and present the resultant data in a form freely accessible to all interested parties including breeders, veterinarians and pet-purchasers. This initiative is being developed in consultation with the Australian National Kennel Council (ANKC), RSPCA (Australia) and the Animal Welfare League (NSW).

The results of this research will allow:

- Potential purchasers to make informed decisions when buying puppies
- Veterinarians to benefit by being able to provide clients with local current data and by being able to learn from the profession’s pooled
- Breeders to recognise which unwelcome traits are increasing and which are being successfully reduced.

This facility will provide breed societies and funding bodies with information that will allow them to generate a prioritised list of behavioural and inherited disorders and to focus their attempts to reduce the incidence of unwelcome traits. Additionally, we anticipate this project will facilitate the production of similar sites for other species

The incidence of obese and overweight pets in Australia – a preliminary report

Dr Tanya Grassi, Anne Quain and Cassandra Pride. Faculty of Veterinary Science, University of Sydney

There has always been a view, largely anecdotal, that the prevalence of overweight and obese companion animals in Australia is high. Studies from overseas have indicated a prevalence of up to 44% in dogs and 40% in cats. Much published evidence of the health consequences for pets of overweight and obesity is available, though the importance of the behavioural implications for the animal and the impact on the human-animal bond has been less well explored.

What we already know

- Dogs are more likely to encounter weight control problems than cats
- Animals at greater risk are female, neutered, older, poorly exercised, animals with obese owners, “only” pets (i.e. single pet households).
- Obesity is associated with medical problems such as osteoarthritis, cardiovascular disease, insulin resistance, liver disease and increased surgical risk.
- There is still a lot of debate about definition and assessment of overweight in companion animals, as well as pathogenesis and treatment.
- The overweight pet has a shorter life span and poorer quality of life, compromising its welfare.
- The incidence of obesity in pets increases with the incidence of obesity in owners.
- Obesity is the product of a positive energy balance where caloric intake exceeds output, leading to adiposity. Only 5% of cases are treatable medically. 95% of cases must be treated through control of caloric intake.
- The bond between the owner and the animal is a crucial factor determining the caloric intake and subsequent body condition of an animal.

The survey

In 2000, a survey was conducted by RSPCA Australia to determine the prevalence of overweight and obesity in the Australian companion animal population. The aim of the survey was to determine the extent of the problem and attempt to identify possible avenues of further study.

Preliminary results

The survey’s findings confirm the widely held view that the prevalence of overweight pets in Australia is alarmingly high. Several questions are raised regarding the role of veterinarians and animal welfare organisations in the control of pet obesity, the importance of altering community perceptions of weight problems in pets, and the introduction of a standard for measuring body condition in companion animals. The bond between animals and humans, and its significance in strategies aimed at reducing the problem, is another potentially fruitful field for further enquiry.

Native and exotic animals as pets - are they really companion animals?

Dr Karen Viggers, Research School of Biological Sciences, Australian National University

Keeping native mammals as pets has recently been proposed as a new strategy to enhance the conservation of wildlife in Australia. A range of reasons why native animals are unlikely to replace domestic animals as pets is presented, as well as concerns about animal welfare and other issues that could flow from keeping native animals as pets. These include (among others):- the increased incidence of stress-related diseases, a lack of information on appropriate husbandry and veterinary care, and inappropriate breeding to select particular anatomical traits. Keeping native animals as pets also has the potential to:- spread disease to wild populations of the same species, spread disease to other species that would not normally have been exposed to such types of infections, and create a mechanism for the spread of disease from animals to humans (zoonoses). These problems have major negative implications not only for wild populations of Australian native animals, but also for human health in this country. It is essential these issues are fully addressed prior to the further development and promotion of the concept of a native animal pet industry. Indeed, for the establishment of such an industry to be justified, there must be demonstrable and substantial positive conservation outcomes for wild populations. It must also be demonstrated that any new industry would not have any negative effect on the status of wild populations.