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Mandy has held the position of Principal Scientist, RSPCA Qld for 5 years. She has a keen interest in animal welfare, policy development, exhibited animals, shelter animal management, wildlife and many other areas within the RSPCA. She represents the RSPCA on government committees including in the areas of kangaroo management, injured koala care, Fraser Island dingoes, to name a few. Mandy is also involved in research in collaboration with the University of Queensland and teaches veterinary science students. Mandy serves on the board of ANZCCART and as the chair of the Centre for Animal Welfare and Ethics Advisory Committee, UQ.

Dispelling the myth that mandatory desexing of cats doesn’t help the cat overpopulation problem

Cats hold a special position with respect to humans and can confer health benefits to owners (1,2). However, it is impossible to be unaware of the problem of the large number of un-owned, feral and free-roaming cats in Australia. Free-roaming cats, whether owned, semi-owned or wild, have significant negative impacts on wildlife populations (3,4,5,6). It is estimated that in Australia feral cats represent a threat to over 110 native species (7) and this threat includes predation, competition and disease spread (8). In acknowledgment of this, cats are classified as a Key Threatening Process in the Commonwealth’s Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999. Feral cats can also cause nuisance to communities through noisy displays and are a source of zoonotic diseases (9). The welfare of free-roaming cats is also usually poor (10).

The extent of the unwanted cat population can be seen by the fact that over 33,000 cats were admitted to Queensland RSPCA shelters from July 2006 to June 2008 (sources included surrendered, strays, ambulance and inspectorate). Approximately 65% of these cats were euthanased (11); the reasons include old age, disease, behavioural problems, and available shelter space (12). A similar US study (13) reported a 71% cat euthanasia rate. In both studies there were variations between shelters and both suggested shelter policies and socio-economic level of the neighbourhoods serviced by the shelters were factors. The link between socio-economic status and cat characteristics (such as level of sterilization, confinement and health care) is well recognised in the literature (14). Low-income neighbourhoods are linked to lower cat sterilization rates, higher cat pregnancy rates and higher densities of cats (15,16).

A confounding problem is that cats are very efficient breeders and producers of kittens. They can become pregnant as early as 4 months and produce on average 1.4 litters per year with a mean size of three kittens per litter (17). These are figures for free-roaming cats and I argue that the figures for cared-for cats are likely to be higher. The traditional age of desexing cats is 6-9 months by which time many cats would have become pregnant. In addition, since cats are induced ovulators and will stay on heat for extended periods waiting to mate, and therefore ovulate and move out of oestrus, they are more difficult than dogs to confine and care for while on heat. This difference is generally poorly understood by the general public and is another factor leading to cats being such fecund breeders.
In recent years, RSPCA Qld has markedly decreased its cat euthanasia rate through changed shelter practices such as lowered cat adoption prices, adoption promotions, increased foster programs and improved behavioural enrichment (18). None of these practices alone, however, can prevent the need to sometimes euthanise healthy or treatable cats. The greatest need is to reduce the total cat population in Australia.

**Mandatory desexing of cats before puberty**

RSPCA Qld, along with other shelters and rescue organisations, face the distressing situation of too many cats and kittens looking for homes that are just not available and is keen to continue to take all possible steps to reduce the rate of cat euthanasia in its shelters. RSPCA Qld sees mandatory desexing of the majority of cats before puberty as a key foundation of any reduction in the cat euthanasia rate. Of course, cats that are registered as breeding cats (and this would not just mean pedigree animals) would not be desexed but would have to be looked after appropriately to prevent unplanned pregnancies. We acknowledge that such a policy would need to be accompanied by other actions such as increased education of cat owners about responsible cat ownership (the need for desexing, veterinary care, confinement), enforcement of cat identification and registration regulations and the general uptake of desexing of cats before 4 months (i.e. before puberty). We certainly realise that mandatory desexing, particularly if it is not enforced or is the only action taken, is unlikely to lead to a reduced cat population. But if a suite of actions is taken, underpinned by mandatory desexing, we believe the cat overpopulation will start to be addressed.

A recent publication from the US (19, p.24) states ‘...both mandatory spay/neuter and low-cost spay/neuter provisions ... will reduce accidental litters, impulse buying, and other irresponsible pet practices’ and ‘full compliance with spay/neuter regulations is the most desirable solution to the pet overpopulation problem.’

**Addressing the arguments against mandatory desexing of cats before puberty**

**High level of desexing of owned cats in the community**

One argument used against mandatory desexing is that there is already a high rate of desexing of owned cats. This argument goes on to say that the problem does not lie with owned cats, but with all other cats. Therefore, it is argued, mandatory desexing would just be another imposition on a population of people already doing the right thing and would not make a difference. A figure of 90% is often quoted (20). Research at RSPCA Queensland, however, found that only 13% of cats entering its shelters were desexed prior to entry (11), but as this figure includes kittens and cats classified as stray it is likely to be lower than amongst owned cats. However, when only owner-surrendered adult cats were considered the desexed rate only rose to 34%, still far short of the 90% usually mentioned. These Queensland figures are comparable to statistics reported elsewhere. A study in Victoria reported only 4% of incoming cats were desexed (21) and USA reports range from 9% to 13% (22,13).

The same Queensland research (11) found that 54% of all cat admissions were less than 3 months of age and half of these were owner-surrendered. These figures suggest that owned cats are breeding, and because the kittens are being surrendered it suggests the breeding is unplanned. I would thus argue that the desex rate recorded at RSPCA shelters is a more realistic reflection of the situation in the community.

In addition, the quoted figure of 90% does not tell us anything about when the desexing occurred. It is possible that this high desex rate is accurate, but that the cats produced kittens before ultimately being desexed. One Australian study found that at least 20% of owned cats have at least one litter before being desexed (23). A study in the US found that approximately 45% of female cats were 12 months old when they were desexed and it was calculated that the average sterilized cat had 2.46 kittens before being sterilized (24). In fact this study calculated that the number of kittens born to cats that were ultimately sterilized was equivalent to the number born to cats never sterilized (24).

From the figures quoted above it is obvious that un-desexed cats are still producing too many kittens irrespective of whether they are ultimately being desexed. For this reason the RSPCA supports compulsory desexing, mandated to occur before puberty, to prevent kittens being born and adding to the overpopulation.

**Loss of genetic diversity and drop in availability of cats**

There is no evidence to support concerns about genetic diversity or availability at all. A study in Australia found that although there has been a decline in cat ownership in recent years, there is no evidence that this decline is related to a high rate of neutering (25) and therefore a lack of availability; rather it was related to changes in life style and behaviour issues with cats. Considering the number of cats surrendered to RSPCA shelters in Australia (approximately 50,000 a year (12)), and to other shelters and rescue groups, and other sources of kittens as being as private sales, pet shops and the internet, it is difficult to justify a concern over availability. One has to remember that not all surrendered cats, even if healthy or treatable, are currently re-homed, that is, there is currently an oversupply.

There is also no evidence for potential loss of genetic diversity. The proposed RSPCA policy would allow cats to remain intact if used for breeding (under a registration system). The RSPCA recognises domestic cats, both short and long-haired as being as worthy as any other cat to produce kittens under a planned breeding program. Also, it is well recognised that cats move freely between the owned and stray populations (26,27), and this is unlikely to stop in the short term, if ever. This continually adds to the gene pool.
It hasn’t worked in the past

The argument that this policy does not work is based on examples where such a policy has been introduced and appears to have been unsuccessful. This does not necessarily mean the policy is wrong; other factors have played a part in the failure. The example of the ACT is often cited in this regard. As the Marston, Bennett, Rohlf and Mornement report (28) acknowledges, the policy was enacted without other necessary actions such as cat registration (no database available to check compliance). The report also states that dog admissions to the RSPCA shelter fell after this policy was introduced but that cat admissions dropped initially but then started to rise. There may be other reasons why the cat admissions started to rise other than the policy was flawed; stray cats moving into the region as others are taken out – the ‘vacuum effect’; poor compliance; complacency and so on.

The results in Cardinia Shire, Victoria, are slightly more promising with a 50% drop in the number of impounded cats in 2007 following the policy implementation along with a vigorous education campaign (28). The council believes this has saved them considerable costs in animal control. Several states and cities in the USA have adopted mandatory desexing laws for cats including Rhode Island, Los Angeles, Dallas and Las Vegas (29) but it is difficult to access information about how well it has worked.

Relevant to this, of course, is the question of what the aim of such a program is and how success is going to be measured.

Such a policy is not supported by stakeholders

Some stakeholders have come out against the implementation of mandatory desexing of cats. One must carefully consider the reasons for this opposition. Veterinarians are quoted as being worried about the risk of a reduced number of pets in the community (28). Are veterinarians worrying about their business (30) or about animal welfare? The Australian Veterinary Association also argues we need to understand the reasons for cat overpopulation better before implementing policies. While there is some truth in the need for more information, one can argue that the precautionary principle would urge action even though all the knowledge is not known (31).

The pet industry is also quoted as being against the policy (28). Again one could imagine they are motivated by commercial rather than welfare reasons. The report (28) goes onto say that it is costly to counter anti-mandatory desexing campaigns. Again this does not seem a valid reason to be against a mandatory desexing policy; there are other ways to deal with stakeholders.

Another group of stakeholders opposed to mandatory desexing is proponents of the no-kill shelter movement (32,33). Their argument is basically that people who do not desex their cats are driven to this position because of the cost of desexing. If such a law is enacted then these people are forced to surrender their animal(s) to shelters unless they wish to remain in breach of the law. In support of this argument they present shelter intake figures which rise when mandatory desexing is introduced (and therefore so does the number of animals killed). This argument is premised on the assumption that the majority of people make informed choices about desexing their animals, rather than ‘never getting around to it’ or having spurious reasoning about negative consequences of desexing. It is also focusing on the ‘kill rate’ in shelters, rather than, I argue, the longer term cat overpopulation problem. These cats that they argue people cannot afford to desex continue to contribute to the overpopulation through breeding.

Of course all stakeholders are not opposed to mandatory desexing of cats. Many animal management professionals support this type of law (34,29), arguing that it will markedly reduce the number of cats in their jurisdiction over time and therefore be cost-effective. Some animal management people, while acknowledging the policy as useful, also acknowledge that such a law does pose enforcement challenges (35). In addition, many animal welfare organisations support the concept. For example, PETA argues it is the only way to approach the cat overpopulation problem (36), and of course the RSPCA maintains that compulsory desexing of cats is an essential component of good cat management.

Conclusion

This discussion has presented evidence in support of the need to take action against the cat overpopulation problem and suggests mandatory desexing of cats before puberty as good policy. The paper also presents arguments to refute the opposition to the policy put by various groups. Although some reports suggest that the level of desexing of owned cats is already high, the number of entire, owned cats entering shelters and the number of kittens entering shelters suggest otherwise. In addition, RSPCA believes there is no evidence that mandatory desexing of cats will lead to loss of genetic diversity or less availability of cats.

The implementation of mandatory desexing in some jurisdiction has proved to be less successful than hoped, although other jurisdictions have reported positive outcomes. The implementation of this policy is complex and probably more complex than first impressions might suggest. Implementation must be accompanied by strong compliance involving microchipping, registration and education of the general public.

Although some stakeholders express opposition to the policy, others support it. The RSPCA wishes to encourage responsible pet ownership and believes desexing cats before they can produce any kittens is a vital part of responsible ownership. Making enforceable laws about desexing sends a strong message to members of the public about what it means to be a good pet owner and that the government are seriously addressing the issue.
References

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