What Can 195,000 Cats Tell Us About Saving Lives?

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Abstract

Findings are presented from data on the first national epidemiological study on numbers and determinants of cat admissions and outcomes to RSPCA shelters in Australia. The study involved 195,387 cat admissions to 33 Australian RSPCA shelters and 6 friends of shelters groups between July 2006 and June 2010. The key role of preventing kitten entry into shelters is discussed through targeted evidence-based strategies, including prior to the start of the kitten season, the use of social marketing messages based on research outcomes, to encourage de-sexing in postcodes that are overrepresented by high cat intakes, hands-on training of graduating veterinarians in early-age desexing, and graduating veterinarians with an understanding of the magnitude of the challenge facing shelters.

Introduction

Euthanasia is considered by some researchers as the leading cause of death for companion animals in western society (Nassar and Fluke 1991). Approximately 135,000 cats and dogs are admitted to the Royal Society for the Protection and Care of Animals (RSPCA) annually, and it is estimated that just under half of all animals are euthanised every year as an outcome to shelter admission (RSPCA 2010). Exact numbers of companion animals admitted and euthanised in shelters and pounds in Australia are not known. However, if council pounds, other welfare group shelters and animals euthanized by veterinarians with a good or very good prognosis were included in estimates, it is likely the number euthanized is between 300,000 and 400,000 annually. In Australia, RSPCA annual reports indicate that although a similar number of cats and dogs are admitted to shelters annually, cats are twice as likely as dogs to be euthanised (RSPCA 2010). Approximately the same percentage of cats and dogs are re-homed; the difference in euthanasia rates lies in the reclaim rates, with very few cats reclaimed by original owners (RSPCA 2010). Strategies to reduce cat euthanasia are urgently required.

Euthanasia of high percentages of cats as an outcome to shelter admission is of concern to our community for not only ethical and moral reasons, but also for social and financial. The Australian Companion Animal Council (ACAC) have reported that in 2006, $AU82 million was spent nationally
and Queensland alone spent $AU30 million on animal management (Australian Companion Animal Council 2009). Research investigating the impact on shelter staff of high euthanasia rates in animal shelters in the United States and Australia indicates that high euthanasia is associated with a high staff turnover (Rogelberg, Reeve et al. 2007) and that 50% of animal workers involved in the euthanasia of healthy animals develop symptoms of perpetrator-induced traumatic stress syndrome (Rohlf and Bennett 2005). There are approximately 350 animal welfare organisations in operation in Australia that work with cats and dogs (Australian Companion Animal Council 2009) and this means 50% of employees directly involved with euthanasia are potentially suffering adverse mental health effects.

Although euthanasia may be necessary for shelters to utilise for very sick, injured or extremely un-socialised cats that are unable to be rehabilitated, its use as a management tool is arguably ineffective. Regardless of attempts to control domestic cat populations by government and control agencies, and despite the very best efforts of shelter staff to re-home cats and reduce the occurrence of euthanasia, many shelters have not experienced a significant drop in cat admissions or numbers euthanased in the past 7-10 years (RSPCA 2010). Detailed information on cats entering shelters, particularly in Australia, is surprisingly insufficient (Rowan 1992; Patronek, Glickman et al. 1996; Salman, New et al. 1998; Lepper, Kass et al. 2002; Shore 2005; Scarlett 2008; Marston 2009; Marston and Bennett 2009). Without a detailed understanding of this complex problem, it makes it difficult to implement management strategies that target the root cause.

To better understand the population of cats entering shelters and the potential risks for euthanasia we set out to examine cat admissions and outcomes to RSPCA shelters throughout Australia. The aim of this research was to gain an increased understanding of factors contributing to the problem and develop targeted, evidence based strategies to alleviate it.

**Methods**

Data were obtained from the RSPCA ShelterMate© database, for all cats admitted alive to 33 RSPCA shelters and 6 friends of shelter groups between June 2006 and July 2010. Only shelters utilising the electronic database during this time were included in the study, and therefore 7 regional shelters in Victoria were the only RSPCA shelters that were not included. Other information to clarify definitions was gathered using structured and unstructured interviews with participating shelter managers and staff.
Variables analysed included state, shelter, day, month and year of intake, age at intake (adult or kitten), gender, breed, coat colour, reproductive status on admission, feral status, admission mode, surrender reason (if the cat was surrendered), outcome, euthanasia reason (if cat was euthanised).

Simple descriptive statistics were used initially to describe the problem and more complex statistical modelling was undertaken to analyse the risk of euthanasia and the effect of seasonality on admissions.

Limitations in data analysis and the interpretation of outcomes were experienced due to a variance in definitions of key variables between states. Of most significance, definition of kitten and adult depended on which Australian state or territory the shelter was located. In Queensland, kittens were defined as those cats less than 3 months of age; in Victoria a kitten was defined as being less than 4 months of age; in the Australian Capital Territory, South Australia, Tasmania, and the Northern Territory, a kitten was defined as being less than 6 months of age, and in New South Wales and Western Australia kittens were defined as less than 12 months of age. In addition, age was an estimation made by shelter staff at the time of the cat admission.

Results

A total of 195,387 cat admissions were recorded between June 2006 and July 2010. Of these, slightly more kitten admissions were recorded compared to adult cats.

Admission

The majority of cats were presented to shelters by members of the general public, and the most common admission mode was as a stray. The second most common mode of admission was owner surrendered. Council admission made up the next most significant proportion of admissions.

Of owner surrendered cats, most were surrendered for owner related reasons (reasons that were based on issues separate from the cat itself). When owner related surrender reasons was examined by age (adult or kitten) there were noticeable differences in the top 3 owner-related reasons for surrender. The most common owner-related reason for adult cat surrender was for accommodation unavailability (no cats allowed), and for kittens, it related to being the last of an owned litter. Interestingly, behaviour only accounted for 4% of cat surrenders. The most common behavioural reason for surrender, regardless of age was inappropriate elimination.

Admissions were found to be seasonal in pattern for kittens. However, there was no statistical difference in adult cat admissions by month.
Outcomes

Expectedly the most common outcome to cat admission was euthanasia. Risks of euthanasia were higher for adult cats compared to kittens, however well over half of kittens were euthanized regardless of having a lower risk. Kittens were also more likely to be adopted than adult cats. Reclaim rates were very low for both.

The most common reason for euthanasia was for medical reasons, followed by age. Of medical reasons, cat flu was by far the most likely medical reason for euthanasia and of age, almost all were deemed too young.

Desexing

Approximately just over one third of all admissions were categorised as being desexed prior to admission and there was no difference in the percentage of males and females that were desexed. Of cats that were owner-surrendered, just under half were categorised as being desexed prior to admission. Of stray admissions, approximately a quarter were categorised as de-sexed.

Feral cats

Of all cat admissions in this study, 10% were categorised as feral. The background of these cats is unknown, and feral categorisation is a subjective measure that can vary between shelters and is based on behavioural observation. This makes the findings somewhat unreliable and further evidence of this was that not all cats identified as feral were euthanised.

Discussion and possible strategies

The findings of this research indicate that if stray admissions are truly un-owned cats, then strategies to reduce cat admissions to shelters that target owned cats will have a limited effect on this population. This information must be used carefully as there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that not all stray admissions are truly stray cats. As surrendering a pet can be a very traumatic decision for owners and there is a fee for surrendering a cat to an RSPCA shelter, some people will admit the cat or cats as stray animals to avoid shame or cost associated with relinquishing a pet. Additionally as almost a quarter of desexed cats were stray, this indicates that a portion of stray cats have had contact with humans at some point. Indeed, the vast majority of cats are coming to shelters through members of the general public and therefore strategies must include public education and raising awareness.
It is likely that many cats admitted to shelters may be part of the ‘semi-owned’ cat population. A Victorian phone survey investigating the attitudes and beliefs of the community towards semi-owned cats reported that 33% of respondents owned a cat, however 22% of these people also fed a cat that they did not identify as their own (Toukhsati, Bennett et al. 2007). There is clearly a need to understand this population of cats and the reasons why people participate in care-giving activities but do not take up ownership, and therefore responsibility.

In Australia it is reported that over 90% of the owned cat population are desexed (McHarg, Baldock et al. 1995; Toribio, Norris et al. 2009; The Queensland State Government 2010). Despite such a high rate of desexing reported for owned cats, a much lower percentage than expected of cats entering shelters are desexed. This indicates that there is something different about the population of cats admitted to shelters and something different about the people who own them, compared to cat owners in the community that do not surrender their pets.

It also indicates that strategies are required to decrease surrendered owned and unowned kittens. “Spay delay” is a likely contributor to unwanted owned kittens. There is good evidence that although many owned cats are desexed, they often are allowed to reproduce at least once prior to undergoing spay or neuter procedures. In the U.S. it was found that the number of kittens born from cats that were ultimately desexed was only slightly less, but not statistically different, from owned cats that had never been desexed (Marsh 2010).

Possible strategies to prevent excess kittens and cats being admitted to shelters have been identified from this research. Firstly, professional veterinary organisations need to embrace early age desexing of kittens and persuade veterinarians to include this in initial preventative health programs (e.g. in conjunction with vaccinations) for kittens. Universities in partnership with animal welfare agencies need to increase training opportunities to ensure all new veterinary graduates are competent at early age desexing. In addition, they need to create opportunities for veterinary students to develop an awareness of the urgent need to address the excess cat problem, and to develop awareness of the critical role veterinarians in private practice have in preventing unwanted pets.

Secondly, social marketing and public education need to be further employed to educate the public regarding the repercussions of not desexing cats’ early and feeding cats without taking ownership. This education needs to be effective in changing behaviour.

Thirdly, the widespread unavailability of pet-friendly accommodation needs to be addressed.

Fourthly, strategies need to be implemented to increase the effectiveness of microchipping for improving owner reclaim rates in cats.
Conclusions

This first national epidemiological study of cat admissions and outcomes to RSPCA shelters has provided much valuable information to guide development of targeted strategies to reduce adult cat and kitten entry into shelters. Strategies need to be directed at the general public to reduce breeding of unwanted kittens and at training of veterinarians because they are at the front-line of preventing unwanted kittens and preventing behavioural problems.

There is much we need to know about the stray population of cats in our community, particularly as they make up such a large portion of shelter admissions. More research is needed to investigate why people engage in care-giving activities with cats that they do not own, but do not take responsibility for. Understanding the reasons for the public delaying desexing owned cats is also important information required to create strong social marketing messages. Clearly, desexing campaigns need to continue, particularly those promoting early-age desexing of cats.

References


