

EARLY-AGE SPAY/NEUTER BEFORE ADOPTION

One statistic cites that spay/neuter compliance rate for cats and dogs adopted from public and private shelters and from rescue groups to be less than 60 percent nationwide. Is it any wonder then that the shelters are still in the killing business and not in the sheltering business? With seven to 10 million cats and dogs destroyed each year in shelters, it is clear that overpopulation is the greatest killer in the nation of cats and dogs and is the major cause of animal pain and suffering.

Alley Cat Allies believes this problem can be solved and the overpopulation of cats and dogs will be substantially reduced if all the tools at the disposal of rescue groups and shelter workers are in place. Two of the most critical factors are early-age spay/neuter (sterilization of puppies and kittens from eight to 16 weeks of age) and neuter before adoption, the policy that all adopted animals are sterilized before they go to their new homes. All shelters and rescue groups to stem the tide of overpopulation and to reduce future numbers of feral cats must institute both of these practices. However, because many shelters believe that sterilization of eightweek- old animals is not advisable, neuter before adoption cannot be practiced 100 percent. Only with a change in attitude toward early-age spay/neuter, will all of the accidental births resulting from noncompliance with shelter regulations be avoided.

GRASPING THE KEY TO SUCCESS

With well over a decade of research and published studies to recommend early-age spay/neuter for kittens and puppies, it is still, shockingly, not widely practiced across the country by shelters, humane groups, or veterinarians. This is in spite of the proven success the procedure is shown to have achieved in reducing the numbers of unwanted animals brought to shelters each year or abandoned to fend for themselves.

Early-age spay/neuter is, however, common practice in a few jurisdictions such as Florida's Orange County Animal Services, which was directed

by Linda Haller at the time the policy was established. According to Haller, the agency set up its own spay/neuter clinic in 1988 to implement early-age spay/neuter and neuter before adoption. The success of the program exceeded all expectations, she said. Orange County Animal Services now has three clinics in the area as well as a mobile clinic equipped to perform spays and neuters, and the effect of on overpopulation in Orange County has been measurable.

"Although the area's human population increases at a steady rate of 4 percent per year," she reported in 1998, "our euthanasia rate is down 13 percent, and our impoundment rate is down 8 percent." Haller also went on to say that the rewards of the program are great. "Those who adopt from us are extremely happy with the program because it releases them from the responsibility of remembering to make the trip to the veterinarian."

The success of the program was recognized at the National Animal Control Association's annual training conference, where Haller and her organization received the Year 2000 Award. They also received the association's Agency of the Year Award.

With the practices of early-age spay/neuter and neuter before adoption firmly in place, shelter time and money now consumed by follow-up on sterilization compliance, paperwork, and care of surprise litters from previously adopted and stray animals can be freed up for such pro-active projects as public education and shelter improvement.

The veterinary community weighs in. One reason that early-age spay/neuter is not currently the status quo is the fear that it may be detrimental to the health of the animal, or that the anesthesia might be deadly to those so young. However, early-age spay/neuter has been endorsed by the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA). The AVMA states that they "...support the concept of early (eight to 16 weeks of age) spays and castrations in

dogs and cats, in an effort to stem the overpopulation problem in these species."

In 1987, Leo L. Lieberman, DVM, challenged the veterinary profession to take a fresh look at our traditional timing for sterilization in his report published in the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association (JAVMA)*. He concluded that kittens and puppies sterilized as early as seven weeks of age suffer no medical or behavioral side effects. His report also stated that puppies and kittens sterilized before twelve weeks of age had fewer complications from surgery than those over twelve weeks. The latest report by Lieberman, addressing the short-term results and complications (more accurately, the lack of complications) of prepubertal gonadectomies in cats and dogs, appeared in the July 1, 1997 issue of *JAVMA*. Lieberman received the 1997 Geraldine R. Dodge Humane Ethics in Action Award for his work in early-age spay/neuter and prevention of companion animal overpopulation.

Other articles in *JAVMA* followed by Michael G. Aronsohn, VMD, and Alicia Faggella, DVM, of the MSPCA's Angell Memorial Hospital in Boston. The articles outlined surgical techniques for sterilizing six- to 14-week-old kittens (January 1993), as well as techniques for proper anesthesia. "On the basis of our findings in this study and another study," said Aronsohn and Faggella, "the anesthetic and surgical risk for neutering pediatric kittens is minimal, providing proper precautions and techniques are used." Subsequently, Peter Theran, VMD, published his study on surgery and anesthesia protocols for both puppies and kittens in the March 1993 issue of *JAVMA*. Research by these veterinarians and many others across the country points to the safety of early-age sterilization and the lack of evidence to support fears that it may interfere with growth and development or that it may increase the chance of health problems in later years. Furthermore, research shows that puppies and kittens rebound much faster after the surgical procedures, with less stress and trauma than their counterparts over six months of age.

Gloria Binkowski, D.V.M., in her article published in the November-December 1993 issue of *Natural Pet*, stated, "While performing sterilization procedures on puppies and kittens does require some adjustment of technique on the part of the surgeon, it seems that performing the surgery on a

very young animal is no more difficult, and may even be easier, than on an older animal." Binkowski, too, emphasized the effectiveness of the practice in addressing the problem of companion animal overpopulation.

SEEING IS BELIEVING

W. Marvin Mackie, DVM, founder of the Animal Birth Control clinics in Southern California, has been performing early-age sterilization since 1988. In addition, he has been active for over a decade teaching safe pediatric surgical and anesthetic protocol to veterinarians who wish to make it an integral part of their practices and assist shelters and humane groups fight overpopulation.

Mackie demonstrated the technique for early-age sterilization in kittens in a video, produced in 1989 by the Coalition for Pet Population Control in Los Angeles. It is available to veterinarians and shelters nationwide. The video, showing actual spays and neuters being performed in Mackie's clinic on cats as young as eight weeks of age, is a compelling testimony to the relative ease of the procedure, both for doctor and patient, compared to the same procedure performed on an animal six months of age or older.

In a sequence where a mother cat and her kitten were spayed literally side-by-side, the mother's slow recovery contrasted vividly with the extraordinarily quick recovery of her kitten. Also apparent in the video, and a point stressed by Mackie, was the fact that, although the organs are tiny in the juvenile compared to those of the adult, the procedure is made easier by the lack of bleeding that is generally present when spaying female cats (who are often coming into heat when the spay is performed). It is also made easier by the lack of fatty tissue in kittens that can impede abdominal entry and uterine horn retrieval in the adult.

According to veterinarians who practice the procedure, there is also no evidence that the occurrence of FUS (feline urological syndrome), particularly in the male cat, will be increased by pediatric sterilization. Other concerns, such as poor skeletal development and behavior problems, also are unfounded, says Susan Little, DVM, of the CFA Health Committee, citing studies conducted by the University of Florida, among others.

MORE SHELTER SUCCESS STORIES

Shelters who have practiced early-age spay/neuter over a long period of time report no increase in physical or behavioral problems in cats or dogs neutered before puberty over those sterilized after puberty. The Southern Oregon Humane Society in Medford, Oregon, which began practicing prepubertal sterilization in 1975, reported the same findings.

Clay Criswell, executive director of the Western Pennsylvania Humane Society, says that the risks of early-age spay/neuter are no greater than those inherent with adult spay/neuter surgeries. Inspired by Dr. Mackie, Criswell's organization has been doing early-age sterilization and neuter before adoption since 1993. Western Pennsylvania Humane Society even has its own clinic, headed by their chief veterinarian Donna Hughes. The clinic employs full-time technicians and clerical staff to keep up with the success of its neuter before adoption program, and even had to hire another fulltime veterinarian.

However, Criswell says that, unbelievably, they are, "still fighting veterinarians who hold to the antiquated belief that an animal should undergo one heat - or even be allowed to have one litter - to make it a better pet." But he believes that by practicing early-age sterilization and neuter before adoption, they are doing their job. "We are actively addressing our mission to reduce animal suffering and to decrease the number of euthanasias we must do each year," he says. "We are painting a much better picture for the future of unwanted animals. In 1987, our shelter took in over 20,000 animals. In 1998, we came in under 10,000. We credit early-age spay/neuter and neuter before adoption with the greatest chunk of that success."

OTHER ADVOCATES

Besides the American Veterinary Medical Association, early-age sterilization and neuter before adoption has received support from such organizations as the Association of Veterinarians for Animal Rights (AVAR), the American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA), the ASPCA, Spay/USA, and the American Humane Association (AHA).

AHA published a 30-page brochure, along with an accompanying video titled, *The Case For Early Neutering: A Tool For Companion Animal Population Control*. The brochure and video contain extensive information on the safety and effectiveness of early-age, presented by Dr. Fagella and fellow veterinarians Patricia Olson and the late Mark Bloomberg. Suzanne Hetts, Ph.D., discusses its positive effect on behavior.

With the support of so many veterinarians nationwide, university research attesting to its safety, and its positive effect on overpopulation, why have so few shelters adopted early-age spay/neuter as policy? And why are so many veterinarians still reluctant to learn and perform the procedure?

THE LAW OF SUPPLY AND DEMAND

Many of us can recall a time when even simple spays and neuters were not common practice. Over time, demands made for the surgery by educated and responsible guardians of companion animals and by shelters and rescue groups made them so. We can also recall a time when such now-routine tests for FeLV and FIV were not readily available. These, too, are now standard procedure.

Consumer education and consumer demand appear to be the keys to obtaining a critical mass of veterinarians who are trained in the techniques of early-age spay/neuter. It is also crucial that the technique be taught in all veterinary schools. (It is now taught at Tufts, Washington State, and Texas A&M, among others.)

Demand must also increase for shelters to set up their own in-house spay/neuter clinics as Linda Haller did in Florida. It is also the most cost-effective and fool-proof way for shelters to ensure that all animals are sterilized before they go to adoptive homes—especially puppies and kittens. While the costs of purchasing special equipment and hiring full or part-time veterinarians and staff may at first seem a budgetary impossibility, they will be more than offset by the reduced number of animals that will be brought to the shelter as a result. Haller confirmed that on-site spay/neuter clinics result in a savings to the taxpayer.

FERAL CAT CARETAKERS AT THE VANGUARD

Alley Cat Allies strongly believes that feral cat caretakers, especially, should take the spaying and neutering of the kittens they trap very seriously. Wild kittens who will be returned to the colony clearly must be sterilized before they are released, especially because some females can become pregnant as young as four or five months of age. Tame kittens who will be adopted out should most certainly be sterilized first. Otherwise, we ourselves are potentially contributing to the overpopulation of unwanted cats.

Because of the necessity to sterilize ferals at a young age, those who deal with feral cats on a regular basis are in a unique position to promote early-age spay/neuter and to encourage veterinarians and shelters to adopt the practice. Starting with your own veterinarian, you can provide him or her with the information and resources to incorporate early-age spay/neuter into his or her practice. Besides letting them know that it not only is a service that clients will routinely begin to demand, you can impress upon them why early-age spay/neuter is so important for companion animals-it saves lives. ■

RESOURCES

American Veterinary Medical Association
Official policy on early-age spay/neuter
1931 N. Meacham Road, Suite 100
Schaumburg, IL 60173-4360
Fax: 707.925.1329
www.avma.org

American Humane Association
"The Case For Early Neutering"
Video and booklet \$14
9563 Inverness Drive East
Englewood, CO 80112
Phone: 800.242.1877
Fax: 303.792.5333
www.americanhumane.org

M. Marvin Mackie, DVM
Animal Birth Control Video \$12
Animal Birth Control
450 Arcadia Dr.
San Pedro, CA 90731
Fax: 310.547.5989

Association of Veterinarians for Animal Rights
P O Box 208
Davis, CA 95617-0208
Phone: 530.759.8106
Email: avar@igc.org
www.avar.org

Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) is a full management plan in which stray and feral cats already living outdoors in cities, towns, and rural areas are humanely trapped, then evaluated, vaccinated, and sterilized by veterinarians. Kittens and tame cats are adopted into good homes. Healthy adult cats too wild to be adopted are returned to their familiar habitat under the lifelong care of volunteers.