

Letters to the Editor

Continued discussion of onychectomy consequences

Once again the topic of declawing has come up in *JAVMA*,¹ and I was interested in the study's findings, although mostly because one of the authors, Dr. Claudia Baldwin, was so kind and helpful to me early in my shelter medicine career when she ran the shelter medicine program at Iowa State University.

However, until someone can guarantee that no more declawed cats will be brought into my high-volume, high-quality, spay-neuter clinic after being trapped in the community, I don't expect to spend much time reading more research on the effects of onychectomy. Questions such as whether declawing is more or less painful depending on the technique used or whether declawing causes elimination or biting problems do not interest me. Every cat brought in to me that is too wild for adoption yet cannot be released because of being declawed becomes my problem; I am the one who has to euthanize these animals, saddened by the fact that someone took the time to have the cat declawed but did not watch it well enough to keep the cat inside.

Whatever happened to the admonition to "first, do no harm"?

Jennifer Doll, DVM
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1. Gerard AF, Larson M, Baldwin CJ, et al. Telephone survey to investigate relationships between onychectomy or onychectomy technique and house soiling in cats. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2016;249:638-643.

I am encouraged that the veterinary profession is making efforts to scientifically evaluate the potential effects of onychectomy in feline patients and believe that the recent study by Gerard et al¹ represents a sincere attempt to answer questions regarding preconceived assumptions about this procedure.

I am concerned, however, that the authors may be misinterpreting their results. In particular, the authors report that the percentage of cats that had undergone onychectomy and were reported to have house soiled (87/304 [28.6%]) was not significantly different from the percentage of cats with intact claws that were reported to have house soiled (33/151 [21.9%]). They later report that cats that had undergone onychectomy and lived in a multicat household (3 to 5 cats/household) were more than 3 times as likely to have house soiled as were cats with intact claws that were housed alone. They then use these findings to conclude that their results "supported the hypothesis that onychectomy is associated with an increase in house soiling behavior of cats." I believe that this assertion is an overreach and inaccurate in its present form, especially given that the authors could not definitively establish whether house soiling occurred before or after onychectomy was performed.

Clearly, more research is needed on the effects of onychectomy. My greatest concern, however, is, if additional studies are performed and few significant differences are identified, whether anyone will be willing to say that there is no proof that onychectomy is harmful.

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1. Gerard AF, Larson M, Baldwin CJ, et al. Telephone survey to investigate

relationships between onychectomy or onychectomy technique and house soiling in cats. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2016;249:638-643.

The authors respond:

The authors thank Drs. Doll and Smith for their letters regarding our recent study. In particular, Dr. Baldwin would like to thank Dr. Doll for her kind words and say that it was a pleasure to have worked with her. We understand how difficult her work must be.

We agree with the axiom of "first, do no harm." However, our study makes no judgment on the rightness or wrongness of onychectomy. Instead, the purpose of our study was to give veterinarians and, through them, the general public, additional information with which to make decisions about this procedure.

It is our obligation to inform clients of alternatives to onychectomy, such as offering scratching posts and other places for cats to scratch or applying plastic nail caps. We also encourage owners having onychectomy done to have the cat spayed or neutered at the same time, to help keep cats indoors.

Dr. Smith is correct that there was no significant difference in the prevalence of house soiling between cats that had undergone onychectomy and cats that had intact claws. To further explore this result, we stratified cats that had undergone onychectomy into those in which the laser method had been used versus those in which any other method had been used. This stratification and subse-

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quent statistical analysis revealed that the prevalence of house soiling among cats in which the laser method of onychectomy had been used was not significantly different from the prevalence in cats with intact claws. However, the prevalence of house soiling was significantly higher among cats in which any other onychectomy method had been used. Therefore, the inclusion of cats that had undergone the laser method for onychectomy in the overall analysis created the nonsignificant difference.

With regard to the other point Dr. Smith raises, the conclusion drawn from results of our multivariate analysis was that “when there were 3 to 5 cats in a household that had also undergone onychectomy, there was a greater risk of house soiling in that household.” However, declawed cats were not necessarily more highly associated with multicat households. On the basis of these results and results of univariate analyses, we concluded that there was evidence for an association between onychectomy and house soiling. The emphasis of this conclusion is on the word association, and we did not use the word causation. Further prospective studies are required to determine whether a causal association exists between onychectomy and house soiling in cats.

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Exploring broad reach of the Animal Welfare Act

I enjoyed reading the recent *JAVMA* News story¹ on the 50th anniversary of the Animal Welfare Act. I agree with Dr. Stokes that the 1985 amendment to the act had a substantial impact on labora-

tory animal welfare. Anyone who has attended one of the many conferences for institutional animal care and use committee members would be impressed by the dedication of these people to the welfare of the animals they serve. However, the 1985 amendment also had other far-reaching effects on animal welfare that I would like to mention.

The amendment's requirement to minimize pain and distress in laboratory animals resulted in a substantial increase in research on pain relief in animals. At first, the results of this research were applied principally to laboratory animals, but over time, the information began to be used in other settings. Today's ongoing concerns about improved pain management in pets are, in many ways, a result of the increased human sensitivity to pain in animals generated by the 1985 amendment to the Animal Welfare Act. Thus, pets have benefitted from the amendment, even though they are not regulated under the act.

The 1985 amendment also required improved responsiveness to the psychological well-being of primates, and the standards implementing the act require that primates be provided with environmental enrichment. This requirement was expanded by the zoos regulated under the act to include enrichment for all of their animals. As facilities became experienced in this area, enrichment practices improved, and the idea of enrichment for all animals spread to other venues. Providing toys for pets is not a new idea, but the improvement in toys and other means of enrichment being encouraged for pets today is another unexpected benefit of the 1985 amendment to the Animal Welfare Act.

Other amendments to the Animal Welfare Act have primarily affected only the welfare of the animals actually regulated under the act, but the 1985 amendment resulted in benefits to the welfare of other animals as well, and I be-

lieve that fact is worthy of notice. Everyone involved in the passage of the amendment and in the implementation of its provisions deserves congratulations for their work. It has really made a meaningful difference in overall animal welfare.

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1. Nolen RS. 50 years later, Animal Welfare Act is a work in progress. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2016;249:706-711.

Drawbacks to trap-neuter-return program

I was unhappy to see the recent *JAVMA* News story promoting National Feral Cat Day 2016. This annual event was launched by Alley Cat Allies, which has for many years promoted trap-neuter-return programs for unadoptable community cats. Depending on the location and situation, however, such programs can raise important cat welfare, public health, and wildlife protection concerns. This is especially true where released cats might kill rare or endangered species, not be provided adequate care, or invade private property.

To my understanding, Alley Cat Allies opposes the establishment of cat sanctuaries that involve group housing of cats in suitable enclosures with appropriate veterinary care and with socialization and rehabilitation of cats for adoption when possible. In my opinion, the dedicated efforts of those volunteers involved in trap-neuter-return programs might be better directed to promoting more effective legislation and education to encourage cat owners to neuter their animals and not allow them to roam outdoors.

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1. Coming together for community cats. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2016;249:729.