

Letters to the Editor

Identifying screwworms

After reading the recent *JAVMA News* story “Screwworms found in Florida: flesh-eating larvae infested deer, possibly pets,”¹ I wanted to applaud *JAVMA* for continuing to alert all veterinarians (both young and old) concerning this devastating “imported” pathogen that can affect all warm-blooded animals throughout much of North America. Veterinarians and wildlife biologists are truly the first lines of defense in recognizing this devastating parasite. The simplest method for identifying screwworms is by examining the dorsal, posterior third of the third stage larva and locating the deeply pigmented tracheal tubes. In past reports of screwworm infestations in the United States, *JAVMA* has routinely described these unique morphological features and provided an accompanying diagnostic photograph.² The photograph accompanying this most recent report, however, was of the anterior end of the larva, which lacks unique diagnostic features. Could *JAVMA* please publish another photograph to allow readers to reacquaint themselves with the diagnostic features of this parasite? Otherwise, an outstanding teachable moment may be lost forever.

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1. Cima G. Screwworms found in Florida: flesh-eating larvae infested deer, possibly pets. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2016;249:1117-1118.
2. Garris G. On the front line of defense: veterinarian averts screwworm outbreak. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 1998;212:159.

Editor's Note:

Please turn to the *JAVMA News* section (page 137) for an update on the current infestation and a photograph illustrating the

pigmented tracheal tubes that help identify the parasite.

Lack of claws not necessarily a handicap

I would like to comment on the recent letter¹ from Dr. Jennifer Doll discussing a study² on the possible association between onychectomy technique and house soiling in cats. I accept our profession's stance discouraging onychectomy. However, I also believe the price rise for the onychectomy procedure has done the most to limit it, and I posit that most owners who pay the current charges are committed, loving owners. I am one of them.

In her letter, Dr. Doll commented that when cats trapped in the community are brought into her clinic and are found to be too wild to be adopted, she euthanizes them if they are declawed, as if this one physical alteration is more crippling than any other condition and proof that the owners were irresponsible. It is intuitively obvious that declawed, microchipped, and neutered cats were owned at one time and should therefore be considered as lost pets, rather than to have been born feral.

If one accepts that trap-neuter-return programs are humane, then shouldn't declawed cats that come in in no worse shape than those with claws be returned to the environment where they were trapped? I came of age at a

time when declawing was much more common and there was less pressure to keep cats inside. Even then, we recommended that declawed cats be kept indoors, but knew that many owners let their cats outside. When living in quiet suburban areas, I allowed, and still allow, my own declawed cats outside. Their lack of claws has never been a handicap to a long healthy life.

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1. Doll J. Continued discussion of onychectomy consequences (lett). *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2016;249:1132.
2. 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.

Examining onychectomy technique

In her recent letter to the editor¹ responding to a study² on possible associations between onychectomy technique and house soiling in cats, Dr. Jennifer Doll lamented that she was forced to euthanize cats brought in to her clinic that were too wild for adoption but could not be released because they had been declawed.

I would encourage her to reevaluate this policy of euthanizing feral declawed cats and instead assess the quality of life of these cats on an individual basis. Cats

Instructions for Writing a Letter to the Editor

Readers are invited to submit letters to the editor. Letters may not exceed 500 words and 6 references. Letters to the Editor must be original and cannot have been published or submitted for publication elsewhere. Not all letters are published; all letters accepted for publication are subject to editing. Those pertaining to anything published in the *JAVMA* should be received within one month of the date of publication. Submission via email (JournalLetters@avma.org) or fax (847-925-9329) is encouraged; authors should give their full contact information, including address, daytime telephone number, fax number, and email address.

Letters containing defamatory, libelous, or malicious statements will not be published, nor will letters representing attacks on or attempts to demean veterinary societies or their committees or agencies. Viewpoints expressed in published letters are those of the letter writers and do not necessarily represent the opinions or policies of the AVMA.

that are well muscled and overtly healthy can apparently fend for themselves despite being declawed and can, therefore, likely be returned to the community.

In my opinion, whether a cat has been declawed is not as important as how it has been declawed. In my experience, methods that preserve the flexor tubercle, including the attachment of the deep digital flexor tendon, result in more normal function of the toes and allow cats to use their paws to catch prey.

Years ago, Dr. Robert M. Miller³ described the method he used to declaw big cats. These cats were declawed for the safety of their cage mates and caretakers when the only other options would have been euthanasia or solitary confinement. He found that by preserving the deep digital flexor tendon attachment to the flexor tubercle, the cats had a normal conformation of their paws, could knead and flex their digits, and had a normal appearing gait. This is similar to the way I perform this surgery on my feline patients and may help explain why some declawed cats can climb trees and defend themselves as effectively as cats with claws.

I continue to encourage the veterinary community to not ban

declawing, but to investigate the best way this procedure should be done.

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1. Doll J. Continued discussion of onychectomy consequences (lett). *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2016;249:1132.
2. 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.
3. Miller RM. The declawing controversy: stepping into the ring. *Vet Med* 1998;93:1043-1045.

Veterinarians must take a stand for animal welfare

I read the recent *JAVMA* News story, "Controversial Texas veterinarian's license suspended for a year"¹ with disappointment but not surprise. Although well positioned to advocate for animal health, veterinarians have not always been well prepared to address animal welfare issues.² In this high-profile case, I believe the veterinary profession had an opportunity to take a firm stand for the humane treatment of animals. In my opinion, Dr. Lindsey's actions were so egregious that she should never be allowed to

practice veterinary medicine again. Instead, the Texas Board of Veterinary Medical Examiners suspended her license for just one year.

There are many gray areas when it comes to animal welfare—the use of animals for invasive medical research and the housing of farrowing sows and egg-laying chickens being prime examples—and good people in our profession can legitimately disagree on the best approaches. The veterinary profession's reliance on science to drive animal welfare positions can make us more cautious than the general public when it comes to taking a definitive stand. Yet, the public still expects veterinarians to be advocates for animal welfare. To me, the issues surrounding Dr. Lindsey's case are so black and white that I cannot defend the decision to allow her to remain a member of our profession. Veterinarians must begin to take a forward-leaning stand for animals or we will, I fear, lose our credibility in the animal welfare debate.

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1. Nolen RS. Controversial Texas veterinarian's license suspended for a year. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2016;249:1238.
2. Main DCJ. Evolution of animal-

Role of cultural values in client decision-making

Over the years, I have read periodic studies and letters to the editor concerning the role of owner finances in the decision-making process for spaying and neutering of dogs and cats. However, I challenge the prevailing wisdom that cost is a primary factor for pet owners.

Fifteen years ago, I served as a liaison between my local veterinary medical association and a coalition of animal control officers and representatives from local animal shelters and rescue groups that was working on a regional grant for preadoption sterilization. I noticed, looking around that room, that all the participants were of similar age, education, income level, and social and ethnic background. The group did not reflect the makeup of the community, and it occurred to me that although we could all point to studies showing the role of preadoption sterilization in a decrease in the number of healthy animals euthanized in shelters, we also were all already culturally accepting of the practice. In addition, we

shared other values, such as older age before starting a family, small family size, and restraint in the display of human sexuality.

Perhaps many people who are surveyed about reasons why they have not had their animals spayed or neutered cite cost because it is a nonconfrontational answer that does not get into more private values. I think it would be interesting for some graduate students in anthropology or sociology to explore views on human reproductive behavior and their correlation with prioritization of pet sterilization. Although the profession is somewhat more diverse than it was in the past, we should bear in mind that there are many subcultures in our nation that help shape people's opinions and the value they attach to animals and their care. We have no hope of communicating effectively or advocating for our patients unless we know and respect the values that shape our clients' decisions. We might even find that just discounting our surgical services to the point of taking a loss will not achieve our goals.

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The importance of being connected

The *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* is generally regarded as the world's premier veterinary medical journal. This distinction did not happen by accident but was earned by maintaining consistently high standards of scientific publishing over many years.

Journals are the foundation of the veterinary profession. Only they have the wherewithal to provide worthy peer-reviewed scientific articles, authentic news stories, expert commentaries, and thoughtful correspondence. Nevertheless, journals are facing competition, as veterinarians increasingly get their information from social media outlets that too often embrace unguarded opinion and unverified information of questionable origin.

The veterinary profession is currently experiencing uncertain times. There is no single culprit, it seems. Rather, long-accumulating trends inside and outside the profession have reached a critical juncture. An important component is inadequate communication among the various sectors of the profession. Perhaps the biggest problem is the illusion that communication has taken place.

Although veterinarians generally claim that they support broad professional dialog, most do not contribute.

Truthful communication is crucial to understanding, and accurate understanding is essential for collaboration and progress. We need a more dynamic forum for the broad exchange of ideas. I believe that the correspondence sections of veterinary professional journals—especially *JAVMA*—should be expanded, and veterinarians should be invited to speak freely and earnestly (in an orderly, respectful manner, of course) about their deepest fears and grandest ideas regarding the

future of the veterinary profession. Unconventional or controversial opinions and disagreements are inevitable and may be difficult to handle; yet, they must be welcomed as sources of new energy that can drive needed change. On occasion, lightening the conversation with a touch of humor may help stimulate the process.

The future of veterinary medicine depends on us. All of us. No veterinarian has the right to remain silent. If you are unwilling to contribute constructively to the debate, you should not complain about the state of the profession.

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