

Letters to the Editor

Disagrees with AVMA's cat declawing policy

I am disappointed with the AVMA position that seems to discourage the declawing of cats rather than encouraging investigation of a better surgical approach. I place declawing in the same category as spaying and neutering—a procedure done for the convenience of owners to make living with pets easier.

Spaying and neutering is not a procedure we would routinely want done to our teenagers, and as a surgical procedure, if done incorrectly, can result in pain and serious post-operative complications. Yet, we have honed our technique to make sterilization surgeries as pleasant and risk free as possible. The same goes for declawing. It is crucial that declawing be done correctly and at the right age.

I own two declawed cats that are now 12 years old. Both are indoor/outdoor cats. My male is an excellent hunter. He is also a fighter and routinely beats up the neighboring barn cat (I get to treat the latter's abscesses). When these cats were younger, both easily shinned up the dogwood trees. My male continues to be quite athletic and last summer somehow climbed into a Sycamore tree with lower branches more than eight feet off the ground.

I have seen a number of older cats that had not been declawed with nail abscesses from improper shedding of claws. This condition has prompted me to recommend declawing as kittens for the cat's benefit. There is no doubt that declawing prevents scratching injuries to people and other pets, as well as furniture and carpets.

I encourage the veterinary community to reexamine the procedure of declawing, perfect it, and recommend the procedure be performed on 14-week-old kittens—

the age that also happens to be an ideal time for spaying or neutering.

*Wendy Powell Feaga, DVM
Ellicott City, Md*

Earlier intervention needed in animal-hoarding cases

I applaud the existence of the Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium and appreciate the JAVMA News article on the issue of animal hoarding (May 1, 2003, p 1190).

Attention to this phenomenon is much overdue. However, I am distressed that the focus seems to be primarily on more intense prosecution.

Every veterinary practitioner knows a hoarder or someone in danger of becoming a hoarder. So far, the only concrete advice to us seems to be to call the authorities. When these people are our long-time clients or sometimes even our friends, it is highly unlikely that we will take this step. The article states that "early intervention is key to reducing the suffering of the animals and people involved in these cases."

How do we go about initiating an early intervention?

I know there is no easy answer to my question. The new Illinois law against hoarders, according to the news article, states that hoarders do not recognize the problem themselves. I believe that most hoarders do mean well but are lost

in a world that we have not begun to understand. We need more research and more literature on the psychology of the issue. We need a solution more sophisticated than punishment alone. Most hoarders, although self-delusional, are aware enough to operate with some level of secrecy and privacy. They are highly unlikely to seek psychological care for themselves. They may, however, listen to their veterinarians. If we all turn into police, we will have lost our advantage as helpers to our patients and clients. The hoarders will go deeper underground.

I hope the Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium will guide us in initiating early interventions.

*Emily Beeler, DVM
Redondo Beach, Calif*

Responses to letter on admission policies

In his letter to the editor, Dr. Beck (JAVMA, May 1, 2003, p 1206) raises some very interesting ideas. Like many in our profession, he feels that veterinary schools and colleges need to do more to ensure that there are students graduating who plan to be food animal veterinarians. Faculty and administrators in academia agree with Dr. Beck on this point.

Dr. Beck seems to attribute the shortage of food animal veterinarians largely to the fact that most vet-

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Letters containing defamatory, libelous, or malicious statements will not be published, nor will letters representing attacks on or attempts to demean veterinary societies, 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.

erinary students are female. The issue is really not gender but interesting students in a career in food animal medicine and preparing them for it from junior high school on. What we all need to do is to encourage rural youngsters to get good grades and take school seriously, so that they can be competitive for admission to the school of their choice. They need to be counseled that taking math, biology, chemistry, and physics is important. If more females than males continue to take the requisite courses and choose to apply to veterinary school, the gender ratio will not change. Food animal practitioners can play an important role in this by acting as role models and encouraging young people to consider a career in food animal practice.

While gender may be a factor, we believe that it is not the only important factor and perhaps not even one of the most important factors in career choice. Lifestyle, working conditions, and a number of other factors influence student choices greatly. We know a substantial and growing number of successful active female food animal practitioners currently in practices serving dairy, beef, sheep, and goat clients in California. There are indications that many more are currently in the pipeline; for example, 14 of the 19 veterinary students in our dairy experience program are female, and 9 of the 13 students enrolled in the third-year elective food animal surgery course are female.

At UC-Davis, we encourage students to consider a career in food animal medicine through mentoring, scholarships pairing students with dairies and dairy veterinarians during the summer, scholarships for students pursuing careers in dairy practice, food animal rounds, involvement in state fair activities with food animals, and a number of other activities. The admissions process must be even-handed, fair, and legally defensible; it does consider more than grades and test scores, it also considers animal experience, career goals, letters of reference, and other characteristics such as leadership qualities, ethics, ability to communicate effectively, and promise of

being a successful student and professional. Male candidates are not "being skipped over for females with better grades." There are simply more females than males applying to veterinary schools and colleges, and the percentage of males and females admitted reflects the percentage applying. Surely Dr. Beck does not advocate favoring males over females simply because of gender?

*Bradford P. Smith, DVM, DACVIM
Davis, Calif*

I am disappointed but not surprised by Dr. Robert Beck's willingness to conclude (*JAVMA*, May 1, 2003, p 1206) that the shortage of veterinarians in swine practice is a direct result of the class demographics and admissions procedures of US veterinary schools and colleges because women don't enter food animal practice. Dr. Beck's proposed solution to the human resource problem (encouraging the admission of interested men with low grade point averages) is equally ill-conceived. To my knowledge, there are no hard data demonstrating either that women are incapable of working in food animal practice or men are incapable of achieving undergraduate grade point averages sufficient for admission to veterinary college.

Certainly, Dr. Beck's thesis is inconsistent with my personal experiences as a veterinary student and veterinary college faculty member.

I wish that Dr. Beck had been present at the 2002 Merck-Merial Veterinary Scholars Symposium at Purdue University, so that he could have heard Dr. Sandy (Sandra) Amass speak to an audience of more than 120-first and second-year veterinary students about her career path from a suburban childhood to a veterinary career in swine research. Dr. Amass is an associate professor of production medicine at Purdue, where she not only teaches swine production medicine but also services commercial and university swine farms. Her research is focused on biosecurity procedures to prevent transmission of livestock diseases. Dr. Amass became interested in swine research and medicine while she was in veterinary school as the

result of positive experiences working with mentors interested in respiratory tract diseases in swine.

Dr. Amass took time out of her busy schedule to participate in the symposium so that she could serve as a mentor and role model for the next generation of veterinarians, as well as an advocate for swine production medicine. Also, Dr. Amass is only one of many prominent swine practitioners who are also women. For example, the current past president of the American Association of Swine Veterinarians (AASV) is Dr. Lisa Tokash. Dr. Tokash's words and deeds also speak loudly to the stated AASV goals of mentoring students and encouraging life-long careers as swine veterinarians.

Efforts at outreach and education to veterinary, preveterinary, and precollege students are likely not only to increase the number of veterinarians interested in swine medicine but also to increase diversity and life experience in all segments of our profession. These activities represent a constructive response to the very real problem identified by Dr. Beck. At this time of critical need, the problem requires creative solutions that do not rely on outdated stereotypes.

*Lisa C. Freeman, DVM, PhD
Manhattan, Kan*

Perhaps I misinterpreted Dr. Beck's letter to the editor in the May 1, 2003 *JAVMA* (p 1206). In fact, I am sure that he did not say we have a shortage of large animal veterinarians because we have a shortage of men in the veterinary field. I am also sure I am misinterpreting his comments that women are only getting into veterinary school because of better grades.

The bottom line for the shortage of large animal veterinarians is time and money. As a recent convert from large to small animal medicine, I make several thousand more dollars. I work many hours less, and I no longer see emergencies. My days of the midnight call are now over. That means more time to spend with my family and more money for the things I want in life.

I could recite the last financial statistics listed in the *JAVMA*, but

instead I will give you my own example. I graduated in 1999. I worked through veterinary school and did not take out the maximum amount of loans available to me. Yet, if I pay the minimum balance scheduled for my repayments, I will be paying for veterinary school until the age of 65. Since I was 27 when I graduated, if I do not pay off my loans early, I will have paid for my schooling for over half my life span. This is what every new graduate is facing. Gender has nothing to do with the shortage issue.

As far as getting accepted into a veterinary program goes, I admit the entrance criteria are not perfect. However, a candidate's dedication to receiving good grades should be a very important criterion for selection committees. If a student cannot maintain a decent GPA in undergraduate courses, what are they going to do when faced with the rigors of a veterinary program? Unfortunately, they will probably fail. Dedication is not gender specific. If you want to be a veterinarian, you do what you have to do. In my opinion, that does include maintaining good grades.

*Dina K. Serven, DVM
Rockford, Ill*

**Dr. Beck responds
to Drs. Freeman and Serven:**

Drs. Freeman and Serven have expressed completely credible

opinions on the subject, yet they offer no potential solutions to the shortage of practitioners in the food animal field. It is encouraging to know that the Animal Summit Task Force has been studying the problem and will hopefully find an answer or answers that will, in time, bring resolution.

One possible suggestion might be to enlist various livestock industries to financially back students who, in turn, would agree to practice large animal medicine. This financial backing would help reduce and compensate the educational debt burden for the smaller incomes of large animal practitioners. This is but one suggestion; certainly others will be made and studied.

Whatever the outcome of the study, the bottom line is that veterinarians will be replaced in many instances by herdsmen, drug salesmen, and other laypersons if not enough veterinarians are available to fill the need.

*Robert Beck, DVM
Modesto, Calif*

**Questions respiratory rates
in cats with diaphragmatic
hernia**

In a recent review of traumatic diaphragmatic hernia in cats (*JAVMA*, May 1, 2003, pp 1237–1240), the conclusion and clinical relevance were that cats with “low to mildly increased respiratory rates” were “more likely to die after

surgical repair.” This range seems to cover the entire breathing spectrum, except for moderately or severely increased rates, for living animals. Does this mean tachypneic (or even apneic) cats were not likely to die following surgery? Perhaps the authors can clarify their comment.

*Joseph Harari, MS, DVM, DACVS
Spokane, Wash*

The authors respond:

Mean presenting respiratory rate of cats that survived (65 breaths/min; median, 60; range, 20 to 96) was significantly greater than mean respiratory rate of cats that died or were euthanatized after surgery (38 breaths/min; median, 32; range, 20 to 64; $P < 0.01$). We did not have any apneic cats in this series, most likely because we only included cats that survived long enough to be taken to surgery. On the basis of our definition of tachypnea (> 40 breaths/min), the cats that died were more likely to have normal (≤ 40) or mildly increased respiratory rates, whereas those that survived were more likely to be moderately to severely tachypneic (> 60 breaths/min). Because of the retrospective nature of the study, causes of lower respiratory rates in nonsurvivors could not be determined.

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