

Reading 1—Introduction to Shelter Medicine

By Paul Waldau

“Much of what occurs in shelters is so bizarre that it almost defies comprehension, much less vivid description.” This claim, which appears in Reading 2—a hard-hitting, controversial piece by a recognized expert and published by the highly successful Best Friends Animal Sanctuary—challenges those who care about companion animals to pause. In many ways, the realities and possibilities of shelters are a microcosm of human-animal relationships—conflicting, even colliding, values are evident in the complex intersections of compassion and harsh practices of killing.

For many, the word “shelter” still conjures up ideas like “a place of refuge.” But as one learns the realities of today’s shelters, one easily sees the role that ignorance, complacency, acceptance of the status quo, and indifference play in this world—knowing such things, it is less surprising that Edward Duvin asserts that “much of what occurs in shelters is so bizarre that it almost defies comprehension, much less vivid description.”

Note, too, that the word “shelter” can, if taken literally, mislead in more than one way. It is not just the realities experienced by nonhuman animals that are an issue. The problems experienced by the *humans* in today’s “shelters” are also troubling—Dr. Rauch will talk about the complicated phenomenon of “compassion fatigue.”

Importantly, as this lecture will reveal, this set of problems is truly a changing area of human-animal relationships. The number of animals killed by shelters today is far smaller than the number killed in past decades—this alone is a sign of important changes in attitudes towards the nonhumans with whom we have been living closely.

Another reason this terrain is changing is that the complicated, distressing, and heavily criticized features of shelter practices, which have been known for decades, have been the subject of much criticism (you might consider, for example, whether you agree with Edward Duvin’s challenges raised in Reading 2). Further, we will not see the overall problem and possibilities of shelters well if we fail to recognize that the extraordinary set of problems affecting shelters did not arise in a vacuum—many harsh practices have been forced upon shelters by social policies and pressing financial realities.

Shelters are, then, as the readings suggest in any number of ways, a place where veterinarians can make extraordinary differences. The precise number of shelters in the United States is not known, but educated guesses put the number at approximately 6,000. The principal animals involved are,

of course, dogs and cats, but many other kinds of animals also can be found in shelters.

Because of increasing concern among the public for the welfare of shelter animals, combined with greatly extended shelter stays for animals in ‘no kill’ or ‘low kill’ shelters, an obvious need for veterinary expertise within shelter environments has developed. Thus, more and more shelters are hiring part-time or full-time veterinarians.

The problems that appear in “shelter animals” are remarkably diverse both in kind and origin—Reading 3 suggests but one way in which “problem dogs” are created by incredible insensitivity in unexpected quarters.

Many individual veterinarians have responded to these challenges—some have developed highly successful methods for identifying and resolving problems in changing shelter environments. Others work to increase veterinarians’ and shelter advocates’ expertise as to what will be necessary to address major problems such as overpopulation—see, for example, Reading 4 regarding what is referred to there as Fibonacci’s 70% rule.

Local, regional, and national groups have also responded. There are many local conferences dealing with general issues or specialized topics such as “emergency shelter medicine.” At the national level, there are now several veterinary conferences that feature shelter medicine tracks.

Veterinary education has also responded—two veterinary schools (Davis and Auburn) already have residency programs, and more than a half-dozen veterinary schools now teach shelter medicine. TCSVM, which has a selective in this area (taught by Dr. Rauch), is presently working out the details of a fourth-year rotation in this field.

These developments have had any number of interesting upshots in the world of veterinary medicine. For example, a group of veterinarians has organized a 501(C)3 organization named *Shelter Veterinarians* (their website is at shelternvet.org, and they have student chapters). The group already has over 300 active members participating in a shelter vet e-list discussing a wide-range of issues.

There are also international developments of some promise—this is important because, as indicated in the following report, the number of dogs around the world is not only staggering but increasing—and concern over their impact is growing.

WHO Concerned About Overpopulation Of Dogs, Health Effects

Thursday, September 4, 2003

The World Health Organization's first meeting to discuss public health and overpopulation of dogs worldwide ended yesterday in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, with the agency warning that dogs can easily spread diseases and therefore need to be taken care of by their owners.

According to WHO, there are 600 million dogs in the world and that number will double in the next 10 years. During the meeting, experts created plans to be presented to governments that include educational campaigns, new legislation on the issue and sterilization programs.

The WHO also stressed that dog owners must be responsible for their animals and that dogs should be socialized to avoid biting people and consequently transmitting diseases such as rabies (Lucia Martins, O Estado de Sao Paulo, Sept. 4, U.N. Wire translation).

Because the field of shelter medicine contributes important ideas and options in the humane care of homeless companion animals, shelter medicine and allied expertise have both begun to emerge as forces called upon around the world in any number of ways. The insights of shelter medicine have helped veterinarians deal with issues such as feral cats on the Galapagos Islands, the stray dog issue in Greece prior to the 2004 Olympics, and an improvement in conditions for dogs in certain Asian dog markets.

In summary, shelter medicine is an emerging field, and one which holds good job potential for future graduates from TCSVM.

The list below drafted by Dr. Rauch as a summary for those who seek an introduction to the many different topics and issues handled by shelter medicine veterinarians.

Shelter Medicine: an emerging discipline

Dr Annette Rauch

Center for Animals and Public Policy

11/3/05

The discipline of shelter medicine is broad, and includes the following areas:

- (1) Policy and management of not only animal populations but also human resources for dealing with each shelter's animal population
- (2) Setting up sanitation protocols to reduce disease transmission within the shelter

- (3) Providing adequate nutritional support for stressed populations
- (4) Designing shelter housing to minimize stress and to maximize animal health
- (5) Understanding how to provide for the husbandry requirements of diverse species
- (6) +/- wildlife rehabilitation
- (7) Quarantine of incoming animals
- (8) Vaccination as part of disease prevention efforts
- (9) Physical exams on all shelter animals to identify preexisting disease conditions, as well as periodically assessing the health of animals living in the shelter in order to promptly detect shelter-acquired illnesses—this allows veterinarians to monitor the success or failure of treatment given at the shelter
- (10) Isolation of ill animals
- (11) Rabies quarantine
- (12) Work together with animal control to reduce problem animals and to enforce animal laws
- (13) Spay and neuter: pediatric, young, adult, purebreds, low income pets, TNR (ferals), targeted populations
- (14) Cruelty investigations, including animal fighting and hoarding cases; forensic data collection; testifying in court; holding animals until trial is complete
- (15) Behavioral assessment/diagnosis and rehabilitation
- (16) Setting up, supervising, and maintaining a foster care program
- (17) Supplementing core staff with a volunteer program
- (18) Humane education
- (19) Legislative advocacy

- (20) Assist with animal disasters
- (21) Promoting adoption
- (22) Promoting pet retention and reducing pet relinquishment
- (23) Providing euthanasia services: owner requested, sick, geriatric, unwanted

All of these diverse areas are tied together by the following principle: **You, as the shelter veterinarian, are applying the principles of population health to the shelter animals in your care.**

This field can offer incredible rewards, as you are helping those animals MOST in need, namely, those animals that do not have a human owner or guardian to advocate on their behalf. One particularly gratifying feature of this work is that a single veterinarian can, in this role, clearly help a large number of animals and often, over time, impact both animal health and pet overpopulation in *your* local community.

Shelter medicine can also be incredibly taxing—shelter veterinarians may work in an environment without good support from administration; they often work with suboptimal equipment and limited finances. Involved treatment of individual animals is feasible only on a limited basis. Shelters interface a great deal with the public, and tend to see some of the best pet owners, who want to adopt a shelter pet, and some of the worst pet owners, such as those who relinquish pets for seemingly trivial reasons.

Shelters that engage in massive euthanasia for overpopulation reasons expose their staff to highly stressful working conditions, which can lead to

feelings of being overwhelmed, and even anxiety and depression. This phenomenon has been termed ‘compassion fatigue.’ Shelter veterinarians are exposed to this risk, of course, but can, through good medicine and creative work with the staff and community, make a major difference in the many lives, both human and nonhuman.