



Shelter

research

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Welcome to the
final edition of
Shelter Research.

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Fourteen editions of Shelter Research have been distributed in hard copy to every major shelter and pound in Australia. Articles in Shelter Research are written to assist the work of shelters, and information contained therein is obtained from international scientific literature and research. Australian researchers are gaining new insights in how we can all serve the people and animals in our shelters better, and we encourage you to review back issues at <http://www.petnet.com.au/shelter-research>

In this edition we recap the research and practises we have brought to shelters and pounds across Australia to help shelter animals and the people who care for them.

In particular we want to highlight some of the important research findings that we have brought you over the last three years that could help you make a difference in your facility in a short time frame and on a minimal budget.



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Training for dogs: Increasing canine adoptions and reducing returns

Extended shelter stays can lead to behavioural deterioration in dogs. Barking, hyper-reactivity and stereotypies are indicators of stress in shelter dogs. But low cost strategies for maintaining the psychological wellbeing of dogs in shelters lead to a reduction in these behaviours, an impressive 25% increase in canine adoptions – and up to 75% reduction in returns.

During the course of her PhD, Dr Linda Marston from Monash University looked at ways of improving the success of shelter dog adoptions. She tracked 21,000 Melbourne shelter dogs by microchip number and discovered that return rates were often higher than shelter estimates as owners would return dogs to different shelters or avoid claiming a refund on returning their dog by declaring he or she was a recent purchase.

Strategies implemented to reduce stress in shelter dogs included “time outs”, massages, and environmental changes such as reducing the number of dogs passing occupied kennels and using head halters and flat collars instead of check chains. Training of shelter staff in reward-based techniques to reinforce desirable behaviours and environmental enrichment in the form of in-run entertainment, training and exercise in an activity area reduced problem behaviours and boosted staff morale.

Part of Dr Marston’s research involved identifying key factors that influence an adopter when choosing a dog. The good news is that dog’s can be trained to behave in a way that appeals to potential owners – increasing their chances of being re-homed. In a shelter where dogs behave in this way, people spend longer interacting with them – providing even more enrichment and promoting a stronger human-animal bond.

Using objective behavioural assessments and adopter questionnaires allows shelter staff to match the right owner with the right dog, making returns less likely. Owners who participated in a Post-Adoptive (PAT) training program, specifically designed to address common problems in the post-adoption period, interacted more with their dogs, felt closer to them and perceived fewer negative aspects of adopting their dog than owners who did not participate in PAT.

In summary, shelter staff can do a lot to increase the well being of the dogs in their charge while also increasing adoption rates and reducing returns – without spending a fortune.



Environmental enrichment for cats: Increasing feline adoptions through environmental enrichment

Just like dogs, cats kept in a conventional, un-enriched shelter environment may display a range of behavioural problems including excessive vocalisation, over-grooming, self-mutilation, reduced appetite, aggressive or destructive behaviours and reduction in normal behaviours. The stress of confinement may predispose them to disease. As we all know, cats with signs of disease or behavioural problems are less likely to be adopted and more likely to be euthanased.

Group housing of adult cats may ameliorate some of this stress – but not all cats are amenable to share-housing (in fact, some studies show that group-housed cats suffer more stress than single-housed animals).

But what a difference a bit of TLC makes. A study by researchers from the University of British Columbia in Canada found that provision of environmental enrichment (anything from a vertically oriented cage to facilitate climbing through to cages containing multiple shelves, toys and other cats) and daily positive handling experiences increased the likelihood of adoption by 31%.

The upshot of this study was that it didn’t matter what type of environmental enrichment was provided – just as long as cats had something to enrich their environment, and they received positive attention. What counts as positive attention? When cats in the study were moved for cage cleaning, handlers used minimal restraint, speaking to them slowly and reassuringly and stroking them. Once the cats were returned to their new cages, handlers spent several more minutes stroking and patting them.

Owners who adopted cats listed friendliness, playfulness and apparent happiness as the most important characteristics in choosing their cat. It turns out that the cats who had the benefit of environmental enrichment and positive handling had those qualities.

Spending a few extra minutes interacting with cats while you go about tasks such as feeding and cleaning is every bit as important to their welfare as hygiene and nutrition. Simply providing some toys, creating a hiding space in a cage (for example the provision of a towel) and giving each cat some TLC for a couple of minutes makes them more likely to behave in a playful and friendly manner toward a potential owner.

Looking after your people: Caring for the carers

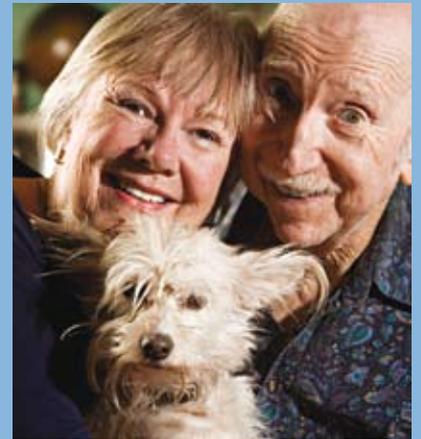
Anyone working in the animal care industry is vulnerable to compassion fatigue. More than just work-related stress, compassion fatigue results from prolonged exposure to stressful events (for example, euthanasia of animals you are working hard to save, being overwhelmed by the number of unwanted and uncared for animals). Compassion fatigue can result in increased staff turnover, increase in work-related accidents, low staff morale and poor quality work. Worse still, it is contagious: when one staff member is affected, everyone is impacted. Over half of shelter and animal control officers may be at high risk of developing compassion fatigue. The symptoms are not unlike those of post traumatic stress disorder. In the 3rd edition of Shelter Research, Vanessa Rohlf discusses the sources and symptoms of compassion fatigue in shelter staff.

But there are plenty of things we can do on both on the individual and organisational level to ensure we care for the carers and reduce the risk of compassion fatigue. Rohlf details how steps like breathing exercises, positive self talk and leaning on a network of family, friends and trusted confidants can reduce the impact of compassion fatigue. She also discusses the role of counselling. Importantly, the role of management in equipping staff with appropriate skills is emphasised. References and details of resources for dealing with compassion fatigue are provided.

This edition featured an article on maximising the success of shelter volunteer programs. In the US, 2 out of 5 volunteers dropped out due to poor volunteer management. Common pitfalls include giving volunteers all of the dirty work, over-spending on recruiting volunteers, failing to roster appropriately and not delineating the roles of permanent staff and volunteers.

As Betsy McFarland, author of *Volunteer Management for Animal Care Organisations* argues, a strong volunteer program integrates volunteers, provides clear roles and creates meaningful work. The keys to maximising the benefits of volunteer programs include auditing programs to identify strengths and weaknesses, integrating volunteers with shelter staff, recruiting, training and supervising volunteers appropriately and retaining and motivating the team.

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A healthier shelter

Matching and after-adoption support

One of the major goals of shelters is to increase the rate of successful adoptions and minimise animal returns. The 5th edition of Shelter Research details strategies that can be implemented as soon as an animal enters a shelter through to the time of adoption to make successful re-homing more likely.

Obtaining a detailed behavioural and medical history from the surrendering owner is important, although this information alone should not be used to match a pet to a prospective owner as it may be unreliable. Consistent, in-shelter assessment is important in identifying problem behaviours and, in some cases, the context in which problem behaviours are likely to arise.

Environmental enrichment and training increase the likelihood of canine adoption but also give staff further opportunity to assess each dog in different situations. Recording details of when and where problem behaviours occur can help build a more accurate profile. It is estimated that around 10% of shelter euthanasias are due to behavioural deterioration resulting in barking, repetitive pacing and hyper-reactivity. Environmental enrichment and training reduce the likelihood of these behaviours and increase the rate of re-homing, reducing the length of shelter stay for many dogs.

Investing time in matching dogs with prospective owners has been shown to reduce the rate of returns. A range of strategies can be employed, from informal interviews to standardised owner questionnaires designed to identify the ideal personality “type” of dog for a particular owner. Determining what the new home environment will be like, either via interview, questionnaire or premises inspection, can be helpful in determining whether a dog is likely to settle in and whether the new home is conducive to the dog’s welfare.

But the job doesn’t stop after the animal goes home. Around 75% of returns occurred within one month of adoption. Supporting owners during this potentially tricky time, via telephone contact or home visits, can help address any behavioural problems. It also means that if an owner does decide to return an animal they are more likely to return that animal to the same shelter, allowing the shelter to determine the true rate of returns. Owners who participated in Post Adoption Training (PAT) reported feeling closer to their dogs.

Keeping the shelter environment clean and disease free can be a challenge. The 9th edition of Shelter Research explores how sanitation, awareness and control of exotic disease and safe animal handling contribute to a healthy shelter environment – with benefits to both shelter staff and the animals in their charge.

The first section details the types of cleaning used in shelters, from physical cleaning and sanitation through to disinfection and sterilisation. Knowledge of the advantages and limitations of these types of cleaning is vital in running a ship-shape shelter. Shelter-specific cleaning tips, such as avoiding mops as these can harbour germs and attending to the healthiest animals first, are provided in a user-friendly table.

This edition also discusses zoonoses, diseases that can be transferred from animals to humans. The most common zoonotic disease among shelter workers, ringworm, is discussed, as is the issue of host immunity and particularly vulnerable staff. Common zoonotic diseases seen in shelters are listed.

One of the biggest occupational health and safety issues encountered in animal shelters is animal-inflicted injuries. Shelter animals are so familiar to us that we often assume they are amenable to handling. But it is surprisingly easy to get bitten, scratched or otherwise injured. The risk of being injured by an animal is increased in the shelter environment because many animals are stressed and/or fearful. Some may have had limited or unpleasant experiences with humans, and we know that injured, frightened or stressed animals are more likely to bite to protect themselves.

Serious bite injuries may require hospitalisation, and lead to extensive absences from work and large medical bills. Fortunately most animal-inflicted injuries are avoidable. This edition provides a range of pointers on handling shelter animals safely. For example, staff should work in pairs when examining, medicating or treating animals so that one person can safely restrain and reassure the animal while the other can focus on the task at hand. Training staff in the use of restraint devices such as muzzles, catching poles and crush cages can reduce risk of injury both to employees and the animals.

Keeping shelter animals and shelter staff healthy is a vital for the wellbeing of all.



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