



Shelter

research

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The importance of good record keeping in shelters **Part 1**

By Linda Marston

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Record keeping might not be fun, but it's critical to running an efficient modern shelter. Good data not only helps you with the business side of the shelter, but can significantly improve the welfare of the animals, facilitate useful research and enable successful animal management strategies to be implemented. Without good data, effective strategies and improvements can be difficult, if not near impossible, to achieve.

I recognise that the amount of paperwork required to track shelter admissions, medical records and other facets of running a shelter/pound is huge. When I first started my shelter dog project four years ago, I climbed into obscure, dusty storage spaces to collate up to six pieces of paper in order to track each individual dog.

By the time I'd tracked 20,000 dogs I'd collected an awful lot of paper.

Six Good Reasons to keep Records

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| 1. | Good records provide you with a thorough picture of how your facility is functioning. This information can then be provided to your board, staff and supporters. |
| 2. | You can evaluate the effect of introducing new programs. After all if you're not sure what's happening now, how can you tell if things have become better or worse? |
| 3. | It helps researchers like me study shelters and find ways to improve the quality of life for the animals in your care. It can also increase rehoming success and reduce relinquishment and euthanasia. |
| 4. | It allows staff to monitor the behavioural and psychological welfare of the animals and take action if and when deterioration occurs. Appropriate interventions can be implemented, conditions improved and effects monitored. |
| 5. | It also assists policy makers and legislators to make well-informed decisions and monitor the effects of legislative changes. For example, it's extremely difficult to evaluate the success of Trap Neuter Release or Mandatory Desexing programs in America because there are little objective, independently evaluated data available. |
| 6. | Last but not least, good record keeping makes it easier to apply for and be successful in getting grants and funding. |

Some Asilomar Accord definitions:

Healthy

All dogs and cats eight weeks of age or older that during their time in the shelter have shown no sign of behavioural or temperamental characteristics that could pose a health or safety risk.

They also show no sign of disease, injury, congenital or hereditary conditions that may adversely affect the health of the animal or affect the animal's health adversely in the future.

Treatable

All dogs and cats that are 'Rehabilitatable' and all dogs and cats that are 'Manageable.' (See below)

Rehabilitatable

All dogs and cats who are not 'healthy,' but who are likely to become 'healthy' if given medical, foster, behavioural, or other care equivalent to the care typically provided by reasonable and caring pet owners/guardians in the community.

Manageable

All dogs and cats who are not 'healthy' and who are not likely to become 'healthy' regardless of care provided; but who would likely maintain a satisfactory quality of life, if given medical, foster, behavioural, or other care, equivalent to the care typically provided to pets by reasonable and caring owners/guardians in the community.

However, the term "manageable" does not include any dog or cat that is determined to pose a significant risk to human health or safety or to the health or safety of other animals.

While there are still limitations in the Asilomar Accord, i.e. the terminology can still be quite subjective and hard to pin down; the Accord is certainly a significant move in the right direction.

Computerised systems

Thankfully, the introduction of computerised systems in many shelter/pounds has significantly reduced the burden of paperwork. The ability for multiple people to access the data at any one time means that veterinarians can update medical records, while admission staff can record other data. This removes the need to move pieces of paper around the shelter and reduces the chance of misplacing important documents. Some computerised systems enable shelters to generate reports and compile statistics in a straightforward manner.



So, as you can see, good information can be more than just numbers, it can be the lever used to bring about many productive changes both within an organisation and the larger community.

Dr. Linda Marston

(who in a previous life was an IT and business systems specialist and now is only a part-time data geek)

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Collecting Good Data

1. If possible, invest in a computer system. Ideally one that enables shelters to effortlessly generate reports and compile statistics. A good software package can help manage staff, volunteers and fundraising activities while generating mail outs and various reports. Some systems may interface with the internet to generate up-to-date 'Lost and Found' or 'Adoption' pages on websites.
2. Gathering detailed information about the individual animals admitted enables complex situations to be better understood. For example, if the only cats ever euthanased were feral, then this is obviously quite a different situation to that which results in a large proportion of rehomeable cats being euthanased. In order to understand this situation, shelters need to capture data relating to the sociability or 'feralness' of the cats involved.

Record keeping might not be fun, but it's critical to running an efficient modern shelter

Behavioural Indicators of shelter stress in dogs and cats

As shelter staff are well aware, the shelter environment can be stressful for dogs and cats alike. Animals entering a shelter are exposed to new experiences, lack of routine, restrictive confinement and a range of unfamiliar sounds, sights and smells. For some previously individually housed animals it may be the first time they are exposed to other animals. Even within a single shelter there may be diversity in the quality of care and amount of attention animals receive on any particular day.



Dogs may manifest the stress of confinement initially as fear, followed by frustration as confined dogs have little control over their environment. Furthermore, their ability to satisfy their social needs and engage in species-specific behaviour is reduced as their interaction with other people and dogs is generally limited. Studies have shown that kennelled dogs separated from their familiar caregivers may show signs of separation anxiety.

Cats may show their stress by repressing normal behaviour such as eating, grooming, exploring or playing (McCune, 1992; Rochlitz, 1997).

As neither cats nor dogs can tell us how they feel, it's crucial that we determine when they're experiencing stress by identifying the appropriate indicators and taking steps to ameliorate the stressful conditions and triggers for kennelled animals. Not only is this important from an animal welfare point of view, but it can have a direct bearing on the adoptability of an animal.

Dogs under Stress:

By Anne Fawcett

A review of studies by UK researchers Jacqueline Stephen and Rebecca Ledger found two major types of evidence of stress in dogs: the presence of abnormal behaviours, and an absence or excess of normal behaviours.

Signs of acute stress in dogs include a lowered body posture, licking, yawning and restlessness. Dogs kenneled alone may pace around their enclosure, chew on themselves or objects within the enclosure, suck their flank area, repeatedly jump up the kennel wall, or engage in incessant tail-chasing. Over time, dogs may become lethargic or even unresponsive. Other behaviours they may exhibit include paw lifting, vocalizing, over-grooming and coprophagy (eating faeces).

Studies have shown that dogs exhibiting these behavioural signs of stress tend to have increased levels of stress hormones in their saliva, urine or blood. Of course the temperament of individual dogs plays a role, as some dogs cope better with stress than others.

To determine how the shelter environment might impact on the welfare of dogs, Stephen and Ledger compiled a list of 15 behaviours previously shown to indicate poor welfare in kenneled dogs. These were pacing repeatedly, wall bouncing, tail chasing, circling, play bouncing, chewing bedding, self-licking, polydipsia (drinking excessively), panting, lack of appetite, excessive vocalisation (barking for more than one minute despite the absence of other people or dogs), listlessness, escape attempts, hiding for prolonged periods and bar chewing.

Shelter staff members were asked to monitor specific dogs as part of their daily duties, 4 to 10 periods of time for 20 minutes per day, for a period of two to six weeks (dogs re-homed in this time were excluded from the study).

Overall, 63 per cent of dogs displayed at least one of the surveyed behaviours in the first two weeks of being kenneled, although the frequency varied. The most commonly observed behaviour was excessive barking.

Interestingly, behaviour associated with anxiety and fear (hiding, escape attempts, lack of appetite) were displayed sooner than behaviours associated with frustration (play-bouncing, pacing, wall bouncing, chewing bedding), suggesting that fearfulness reduced over time. The onset of behaviours associated with frustration suggests that the kennel environment does not meet the behavioural needs of dogs.

The study also found that there is significant variation between behaviours displayed by an individual dog at different times. Younger dogs were more likely to engage in play bouncing and chewing bedding. Female dogs displayed tail chasing sooner than males but there were no other gender based differences in behaviour. There were some important differences when breeds were compared. German shepherds barked earlier than other breeds, although terriers, spaniels, collies and German shepherds were the main culprits for excessive barking overall. Terriers and Staffordshire terriers were more likely to pant, and Staffordshire terriers were the most likely to engage in escape attempts.

However, these results should be interpreted carefully. The study did not take into account the time the dogs spent performing these behaviours daily. Furthermore, because observations were performed by shelter staff, the study does not indicate how dogs may behave in the absence of an observer. Also some behaviour, particularly excessive barking, is more likely to be noticed and therefore recorded, than others such as paw lifting.

Behaviour such as excessive barking or hiding, could deter prospective owners and delay adoption. But if shelter staff can reduce these behaviours they are likely to increase the likelihood of early adoption (see Shelter Research editions 1 and 2 for articles on rehabilitation and environmental enrichment). By targeting those dogs that are most prone to stress, shelter managers may make best use of their limited resources.

Hints & tips for dogs

1. Some behaviour which is associated with poor welfare may, in fact, result from a medical problem (e.g. panting, paw-lifting, lack of appetite). Consult a vet to rule out a medical cause.
2. Dogs are more likely to exhibit fear-related behaviour when first entering a shelter, (1-2 weeks) whereas behaviour associated with frustration tends to develop later (3-4 weeks). Where resources are limited, the introduction of novel stimuli should be minimised for recently admitted dogs, whilst environment enrichment should be targeted at those animals housed in the shelter for a longer period of time.
3. Consider group-housing young dogs or dedicating play time, as they may otherwise engage in play bouncing or chewing bedding. Ensure bedding in kennels housing young dogs cannot be swallowed as it could become a gastrointestinal foreign body.
4. Providing environmental enrichment for older dogs may reduce their tendency to bark and pant excessively.
5. Be aware of breed-specific tendencies. Staffordshire terriers are more likely to escape and therefore need to be housed in sturdy facilities. German shepherds are more likely to commence barking excessively.

Cats under Stress: By Dr Timothy Adams

American researchers, Carlstead, Brown and Strawn (1993), demonstrated that cats under stress withdraw and behave passively. They identified that feline indicators of stress include a lack of exploratory play, increased alertness and increased resting behind the litter tray in an attempt to hide.

Poor animal husbandry such as unpredictable handling and feeding is one of the most stressful things for cats housed in shelters, reflecting the importance of positive human/cat interactions i.e., talking, grooming and play sessions.

When combined with a cat's inability to hide or rest, stress-related behaviours may appear as:

- Aggression to people and other cats
- Over grooming
- Fearfulness
- Anorexia (refusal to eat),
- Tail-chasing
- Excessive repetition or lack of variation in movements (stereotypies)
- Hiding
- Fabric eating, and
- Self mutilation (Smith, 1995)



There are a number of ways to reduce stress for cats in shelters.

Firstly, create a routine that cats can predict and readily respond to, by ensuring that feeding and respectful handling occur at regular times throughout the day.

Secondly, cat housing should be both stimulating and complex. Simply increasing housing space is less beneficial than modifying the quality of that space (see Hints and Tips for Cats) (Smith, 1995).

Thirdly, most cats benefit from group housing (Rochlitz, 2002) provided that there is enough space. US researchers, Kessler and Turner (1999) suggest that this should be 1.7m² per cat for group-housed cats, with easy access to feeding and elimination areas and an adequate number of retreats and resting places.

Cats that fail to adapt to group living generally adapt well to pair housing. If cats show ongoing incompatibility with other cats then they should be housed singly, while allowing for them to engage in visual contact with other cats, if they wish.

Of course, individual cats vary in their needs. For example, those that are timid, extremely young or old, or have not been socialised may be more likely to have difficulty adjusting to confinement. Overall, male cats may develop more problems in restricted environments than females.

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Hints & tips for cats

- Hiding helps cats cope with stress. Cats like to have access to a cosy hiding place like a box or deep sided tray.
- Visual barriers such as vertical panels, trellises or curtains can be used to divide enclosures into separate spaces.
- An enclosure should be large enough to allow cats to express a wide range of normal postures and behaviours i.e. stretching, exploring and playing. It should also be large enough to allow for the caretaker to carry out routine procedures easily.
- For the majority of time, cats like to rest alone. Research has shown that cats that sleep on soft surfaces have longer periods of deep sleep than those that don't. If there aren't enough comfortable resting places, a cat will use its litter tray as a bed.
- Cats use high vantage points to view their surrounding. The addition of climbing frames, raised walkways, hammocks and platforms or shelves placed at different heights encourages this natural behaviour. Enclosures should be at least 1.5 m high so that the cats can rest well above ground level.
- Slanting boards, steps and poles will help kittens and small cats reach raised areas.

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From the Editor



Kate with her dog Archie

Dear Readers,
Welcome to the fourth edition of Shelter Research newsletter. This edition focuses on indicators of compromised welfare of cats and dogs in shelters and the importance of good record keeping. As we draw closer to the Christmas/Summer holiday period, which is your busiest time of year, these considerations become even more important.

Also in this issue, we have included a one page survey about data collection in shelters and pounds. The aim of the survey is to help us identify ways we might be able to assist you in improving data management.

Finally, I'd like to thank you all for your continued support of this publication.

The editorial committee of Shelter Research wishes you all a very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year! Keep up the good work.

Cheers
Kate Mornement

Please send your ideas to:
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The importance of good record keeping in shelters

(Front page article continued)

Comparing Apples with Apples: The Importance of Using Standardised Shelter Language and Methods

Although existing Australian regulations require that certain admission and outcome data be collected, different organisations use different methods to collect these data.

However, if you need to collate data from multiple organisations, then you have to agree what the various terms mean beforehand, otherwise you cannot compare anything. This means that you need to use standardised variables, consistent shelter language and methods.

Computerised record keeping systems help achieve this by enforcing the use of standardised definitions e.g. providing specific options for variables in drop-down boxes.

For instance, when entering in 'Admission Type', you might be offered the following:

- a) Owner-surrender
- b) Stray presented by a member of the public
- c) Stray presented by an Animal Management Officer
- d) Animal admitted by an Inspector (appointed under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animal Legislation)
- e) Fostered animal being returned
- d) Transfer to or from other institutions.

Accumulating useful data on admission type then becomes straight-forward.

The Asilomar Accord

In 2004 the "Asilomar Accord" was created when American national leaders and local agencies came together to create a standard language that all shelters could use to enable accurate data collection to occur.

The Accord also created a set of principles and beliefs that would act as common ground for all agencies across America to work successfully together.

The Accord removes subjective umbrella terms such as 'adoptable', which can mean many things to many people, and replaces them with more clearly defined terms (see definitions table on page 3).

Full details of the Asilomar Accord can be found at www.asilomaraccords.org



For full details of the Asilomar Accord go to www.asilomaraccords.org

Data Collection Survey for Pounds and Shelters

We would like to identify ways we can help to increase adoption rates and reduce euthanasia rates by improving shelter data management. We are interested in your current views and practices.

This survey is being conducted by **Petcare Information and Advisory Service Pty Ltd** (www.petnet.com.au) for the Shelter Research newsletter.

Please take a few moments to complete this survey and fax it back to 03 9827 5090. It is completely anonymous and will remain confidential. We will use the results to generate information and tools to assist the work of Australian shelters.

1. Please indicate which of the following data/statistics you collect? (Please tick)

<input type="checkbox"/>	Admission data – such as public/Ranger stray, seized, owner surrender
<input type="checkbox"/>	Outcome data – such as adoption, reclaimed by owner or euthanasia
<input type="checkbox"/>	Descriptions of the animal – such as colour, estimated age
<input type="checkbox"/>	Temperament assessment
<input type="checkbox"/>	Health assessment
<input type="checkbox"/>	Lost and Found Register
<input type="checkbox"/>	Shire or municipal statistics
<input type="checkbox"/>	Volunteer Data
<input type="checkbox"/>	Staff Data
<input type="checkbox"/>	Data relevant to grants

Other _____

2. What method does your shelter/pound use to collect this information?

<input type="checkbox"/>	Paper based
<input type="checkbox"/>	Computer system

Other (Please describe) _____

3. If your shelter/pound uses a computer program for entering and storing data please indicate the name of the program _____

a	Is the program sufficiently flexible to meet your needs?	YES	NO
b	Is the program easy to use?	YES	NO
c	Did staff require extensive training to use the system?	YES	NO
d	Can you generate new report formats easily?	YES	NO
e	Has the system saved you time?	YES	NO
f	Has the system made your operation more efficient?	YES	NO

4. If there any problems/limitations associated with how you currently collect your shelter/pound data, please describe them?

5. If you are not using a computer program to collect your shelter/pound data currently, but have access to a computer, would you be interested in a simple program to do so, if it were free?

YES	NO
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Why or why not?



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