



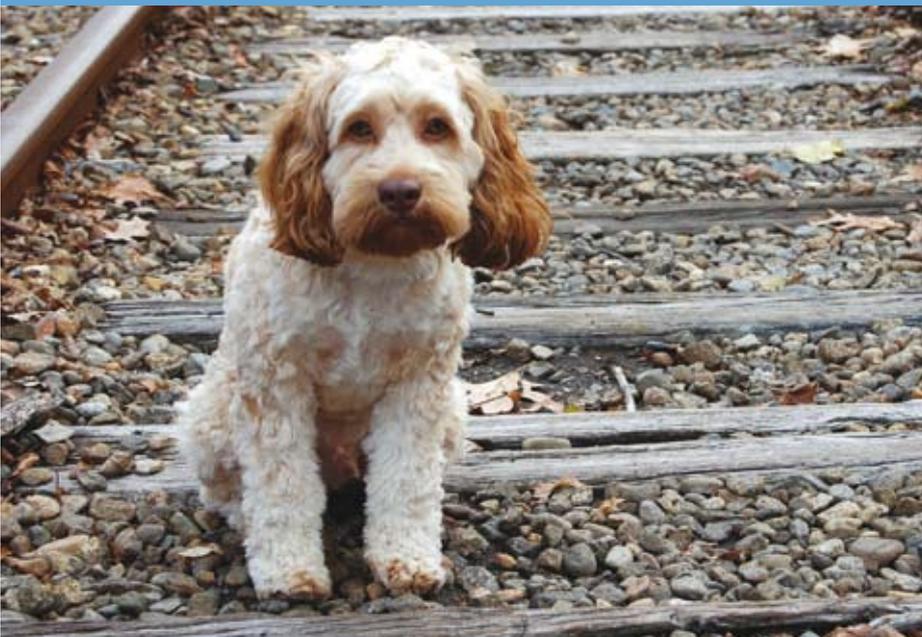
Shelter

research

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Why do dogs enter shelters?

by Anne Fawcett



To reduce dog admissions and euthanasias, it is important for shelters to know why dogs are admitted in the first place - and where they are coming from. Until recently, this data has been thin on the ground.

A study of three metropolitan Australian shelters in Melbourne has turned up some very interesting information about canine relinquishments. The study, conducted by scientists from the

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Animal Welfare Science Centre (AWSC) at Monash University, recorded data on almost 21,000 admissions to the three shelters over a twelve month period (Marston et al, 2005). In order to determine whether issues differed between shelter locations, the shelters included one central city facility, a suburban facility and a shelter located on the rural fringe of the city.

The study found that around 11% of relinquishments were due to behavioural reasons. These included (in order of frequency) escaping; hyperactivity; boisterousness; mouthing; poor housetraining; dog being too demanding; barking; predatory behaviour; uncontrollability; destructiveness; digging and separation anxiety.

It is helpful for shelters to identify the prevalence of these problems as many are amenable to training. For example, it has been shown that increased time spent by the owner interacting with their dog improved the human-dog relationship and reduced separation-related issues.

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One-third of relinquishments were for owner-related reasons. These included (in order of frequency) accommodation problems or moving; owner health or personal reasons; the dog requiring too much work, effort or time; the dog being abandoned; lack of owner commitment; financial reasons; not having chosen the dog; welfare issues; mismatch; issues with children; wrong decision; not fitting in with the family and unrealistic owner expectations.

In almost half of the total number of cases, owners did not provide a reason for relinquishing their dog. This is an area that needs to be addressed, as shelters cannot effectively target campaigns without having some understanding of why dogs are relinquished. For the greatest benefit, the way information is collected from relinquishing owners should be standardised across shelters so that comparisons can be made.

Issues, such as the characteristics of relinquished dogs and their length of stay at the shelter, differed significantly across the three shelters in the study. For example, more small dogs were admitted to the city shelter, a greater proportion of medium sized

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dogs were admitted to the suburban shelter, and more large dogs were admitted to the rural shelter. A greater proportion of sexually entire dogs were admitted to the city shelter (83% of admissions) than the rural shelter (61%). Stray admissions were far more likely to be entire than were relinquished dogs.

The city shelter held dogs for the least time, followed by the rural shelter then the suburban shelter. The time taken to rehome a dog correlated with size - the larger the dog, the longer it took to rehome.

The rural shelter was more successful than the others at reuniting stray dogs with owners. The suburban shelter was the most successful at rehoming dogs, selling one third of admissions. This may be due to a higher public profile of the facility, or due to the types of dogs admitted. The city shelter

euthanased the greatest proportion of admissions, but this may reflect the greater number of strays admitted, or higher demand for limited shelter space in the city centre.

Why people surrender their dog

Owners relinquishing dogs to the city shelter were more likely to cite destructiveness, aggression, escaping and barking as the reasons. This may reflect the fact that many city-dwelling animals are confined to smaller spaces, including indoors. Suburban residents cited hyperactivity and boisterousness as the most common reasons.

Ultimately the study identified that each shelter had different strengths. The suburban shelter performed best when it came to relinquishment and adoption, and appeared to reduce problems occurring when integrating an adopted dog with existing pets. The rural fringe shelter performed best in reuniting strays with owners, and had less of a problem with post-adoptive returns (possibly due to better matching of owners with pets). The city shelter had the fastest reclaim rate of stray dogs.

This information can be used by shelters to develop campaigns to increase successful adoptions. For example, suburban owners can be educated via local media on strategies to combat hyperactivity and boisterousness, while city dwellers may be better served by detailed information on how to quiet barking dogs.

Training Matters

Overseas research has found that the risk of relinquishment is reduced when obedience training is undertaken or owners receive some form of education or advice.

A US study (Patronek et al 1996) found that dogs were more likely to be relinquished if owners did not participate in obedience classes, failed to seek veterinary care, failed to have their pet desexed, had inappropriate expectations about care, or if the dog had inappropriate elimination on a daily or weekly basis. The risk was reduced when obedience training was undertaken and helpful advice received. Desexed animals were less likely to be relinquished.

A UK study (Diesel et al 2008) found that adopted dogs that showed aggression towards people were 11 times more likely to be returned to the rehoming centre. However, if the owners called the shelter for advice, these dogs were only 5.6 times as likely to be returned.

Owners who found the work and effort of keeping a dog greater than they expected were almost ten times more likely to return their dog than those who found the effort to be less than they expected. This suggests that adoptions may be much more successful if owners are informed and encouraged to seek advice to address problem behaviours if and when they arise. Progress is being made in Australia. According to the 2006 National People and Pets Survey, 89% of dog owners reported their animal had some form of identification, with 51% of dogs being micro-chipped. The survey, which includes pet owners and non-pet owners, found that owner responsibility - in terms of desexing, training, nuisance reduction, care and exercise - has increased. All of these factors are likely to increase owner satisfaction, strengthen the human-animal bond and reduce relinquishments.

While these encouraging findings show that public education, legislation and increased resources for pet owners are having a positive impact, there is still a long way to go when it comes to reducing shelter admissions.

Rehoming

One way to reduce the number of euthanasias is to increase the number of strays rehomed. While microchips should increase the number of reclaims, the joy of finding a microchip is all-too-often followed by disappointment when the owner cannot

Microchips are only effective if the owner's contact details are current

be contacted. Microchips are only effective if the owner's contact details are current. Shelters can work with other stakeholders, such as local councils and veterinary clinics, to promote this.

Other strategies include keeping a detailed, up-to-date register or database for lost and found pets, or a website where people can register details and photos of lost pets.

Shelters can also take steps to reduce return rates by being proactive in educating

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prospective and new owners about what to expect from their dogs and what to do if they have problems.

Providing pre-adoption information sessions, information about how to address common behavioural problems and access to low-cost training classes may reduce returns significantly. It may be possible to establish a telephone advice line or referral service to help owners connect with specialist veterinarians, trainers and community obedience clubs.

In addition, shelters may provide owners with information (a handout or website for example) on low-cost methods of environmental enrichment to combat boredom.

Resources

As mentioned in Edition 6 the Victorian DPI's **We Are Family** website www.pets.info.vic.gov.au/wearefamily is an excellent online resource helping children and pets co-exist. The South Australian Government's '**Good Dog**' website www.gooddogsa.com is also an excellent online resource. It has many tips to help people become responsible owners, avoid dog bites and has a cute interactive game for children to increase their awareness about responsible dog ownership.

Because the most common owner-related reasons for relinquishment were accommodation related, it follows that availability of more pet-friendly accommodation may prevent some owners from having to relinquish their dogs. Shelters can work with other stakeholders to increase the availability of pet-friendly accommodation. For example, working with local councils to create more "off-leash" areas may allow apartment dwellers to exercise their pets regularly. Providing tenants with accurate information and tips on how to negotiate with their landlord to keep a pet in a rental property may allow renters

to keep their pets. There are a number of excellent resources provided by **Pet Net** www.petnet.com.au/rent/renting.html and **Dogs Victoria** www.vca.org.au/Content.asp?ID=160 to assist renters with this task

Interestingly, the research by Monash University found that there was a greater prevalence of desexed female dogs than male dogs admitted to shelters. This suggests that the desexing message has not been equally well received for both sexes, and members of the community may be less likely to desex male dogs. Some owners may see more of an incentive to desex females to avoid the task of raising and rehoming puppies. Targeted community education campaigns outlining the benefits of desexing male dogs may have a greater impact.

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Why some dog adoptions fail and what we can do about it.

Understanding why adopters return their dogs to shelters is an important step towards attempting to minimise relinquishments and optimize adoption rates.

Informed shelter workers may also be better equipped to deal with the stresses that arise and manage them accordingly. For example:

Dogs returned within one week of adoption generally had issues with an existing pet. Dogs returned within one month were more commonly taken back because of owner-related factors, i.e. accommodation, owner health and financial problems.

Studies demonstrate that both male dogs and strays show more undesirable behaviours compared to females or relinquished dogs. Puppies are less likely to have behavioural problems than juveniles or adults.

The majority of returned dogs are older than six months of age.

20% of people who adopted the same dog (if the dog was adopted out more than once) reported the same behavioural problems.

50.6% of the owners that returned the pet found the problem developed within 24 hours of obtaining the dog, and a further 16.9% found that problems developed within the first week.

While researchers have discovered that return rates vary greatly from country to country, shelter policies can have a large impact on return rates.

Policies that Work in Reducing the Rate of Returns

Provide practical information to pet adopters on what to expect from their new dog.

Providing such information means that adopters will have more realistic expectations and will be better equipped to deal with the most common reasons for animal return. For example, dog behavioural issues account for 39% of returns and aggression for 15%. Lack of compatibility with children or existing pets was also listed in the top five reasons why dogs were returned.

Encourage pet adopters to seek advice in relation to aggression management as soon as a problem arises.

Research has shown that taking such action may reduce the number of dogs returned. The return rate for those who did not seek advice has been measured at 4.8% compared to just 2.9% for those that did.

Shelters that conduct behavioural assessment and matching programs have far lower return rates.

Larger dogs rehomed with families ill equipped to deal with their requirements, (exercise, food etc) will have a far higher failure rate.

Likewise, when considering a new home for a dog, those with a yard, garden or a terrace will generally find it easier to manage a newly adopted dog. Potential adopters without such amenities may need to be provided with better information, ongoing support and an appropriate dog to suit their environment.

Behavioural rehabilitation can be used in-shelter to address behavioural issues that are reported when a dog is relinquished, reducing the likelihood that such behaviours will occur in a new home.

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Kate with her dogs Archie and Charlie

Editorial

Shelter Research is compiled by an editorial committee: Dr Pauleen Bennett (Monash University), Dr Linda Marston (Monash University), Kate Mornement (Monash University), Timothy Adams (Petcare Information and Advisory Service).

This publication is distributed 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.

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