

Exploring the Bond

Emotional responses of animal shelter workers to euthanasia

Debra J. White, MSW, and Ruth Shawhan, MSW

Euthanasia is an everyday occurrence at many of the nation's 5,000 animal shelters. Little has been written about how euthanasia of animals affects animal shelter workers. Only a handful of articles and books about the mental health problems faced by shelter employees are available. Such employees may face serious mental health issues, in particular depression, unresolved grief, anger, and nightmares.¹ In recent years, veterinarians and mental health specialists have been asked to provide counseling to shelter workers to help them cope with euthanasias. Although veterinarians do not receive mental health training in veterinary school, most would be unlikely to refuse such requests. The purposes of the surveys reported here were to give veterinarians and mental health workers insight into the stressful nature of animal shelter work and to help these professionals to provide mental health services to shelter workers.

Scope of the Problem

The Humane Society of the United States estimates that approximately 8 million unwanted dogs and cats are euthanatized every year in animal shelters across the United States.² Many, but certainly not all, of these animals are healthy, often young, and frequently adoptable. Overpopulation continues to be a problem, despite the widespread availability of safe and affordable spay/neuter programs. The Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (MSPCA) published a study indicating that 39,000 animals are euthanatized every day in animal shelters throughout the United States.³

Surveys

During July and August 1993, an introductory letter outlining the nature of the survey was sent to 162 selected US animal shelters, including shelters in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands.⁴ At least 2 shelters from every state were selected, and more than 2 shelters were chosen in highly populated states, such as New York, California, and Texas. A self-addressed return postcard was enclosed with the letter for shelter directors to indicate their willingness to participate in the survey and the number of employee surveys they needed. Self-addressed envelopes and copies of a letter describing the study to the interested employees were

Ms. White's address is 151 Wood Rd, Freeville, NY 13068. Ms. Shawhan's address is 3792 Oak Forest Dr, Bartlett, TN 38135.

Table 1—Age distribution of respondents to shelter employee survey

Age (y)	No. of employees	Percentage of total
20 and younger	15	7
21-29	69	35
30-39	73	37
40-59	34	17
60 and older	3	1
None given	6	3
Total	200	100

sent to the participating shelters, along with a copy of the directors' survey.

A total of 618 employee surveys were sent to the 86 shelters that agreed to participate; 4 shelters declined. Three shelters indicated that they were "no-kill" facilities and therefore could not participate, and 8 were humane societies without shelters that could not be included in the study. Sixty-one shelters did not respond to the introductory letter.

In the first questionnaire, we requested demographic and statistical information from the organization, such as number of employees; how many animals were annually surrendered to them, adopted, and euthanatized; adoption and reclaiming fees; and annual costs. In the second survey, we asked employees how long they had been employed at the shelter, if they had worked at another shelter, how many days per week they participated in euthanasias, how long they had participated in euthanasias, and their age and sex. They also were asked to describe, in essay format, their feelings and thoughts about euthanasia. Participation in the employee survey was voluntary.

Findings and Discussion

Of the 86 shelters that agreed to participate, 44 (51%) completed and returned the directors' survey; 200 shelter employees completed and returned the employee survey. Only 6 employees did not complete the section describing their feelings about euthanasia. The majority of the respondents (71%) were female. Most of the respondents (72%) were in the age categories between 21 and 39 years (Table 1). The youngest respondent was a 14-year-old girl who worked part-time and the oldest was a 62-year-old man.

Of the 200 employees, 65 (32%) had been at their job between 1 and 2 years, 37 (19%) had been on the job for more than 2 years but less than 5 years, and 61 (31%) had been employed there for more than 5

years. Only 37 (19%) of the respondents had been in their job for less than 1 year. High turnover rates were not observed among the employees in the animal shelters who participated in this survey, although shelter directors reported that this was sometimes a problem.

Only 3 employees indicated that they had sought psychological counseling because of their participation in euthanasias. Another employee stated that she had considered individual psychological counseling but said, "I couldn't afford it on my \$5.00 hourly pay." Twenty workers revealed that they participated in an ongoing support group or that their shelter had counseling services available. Thirty-two employees said they had participated in workshops or seminars dealing with euthanasia.

Of the 44 shelter managers who responded, 67% said that their shelters offered a support group or had counseling services available to help their employees cope with euthanasia. Managers stated that not all employees take advantage of these services. Many shelter managers (47%) indicated that some employees had refused to participate in euthanasias.

Euthanasia data—A combined total of approximately 300,000 unwanted animals, mostly dogs and cats, were surrendered to the 44 shelters that participated in this survey. Only 63,000 of these animals were adopted or returned to their owners. Approximately 237,000 (79%) of the animals brought to the shelters were euthanatized. According to the Minnesota Valley Humane Society,^b Oregon Humane Society,^c and MSPCA, Springfield, Mass.,^d some animals were euthanatized at their owners' request because of sickness, injury, or advanced age. Not every dog or cat that is surrendered to an animal shelter can be placed for adoption because of temperament problems or illness. In the authors' experience, most shelters do not try to place older animals, even if they are healthy, because they are rarely adopted. In New York City, an estimated 46,000 dogs, cats, and other domestic animals were euthanatized in 1992 by the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, whose shelter handles more unwanted animals than any other in the United States.⁴ In Houston, the shelter euthanatized more than 24,000 unwanted animals in 1992.^e

The majority (95%) of shelters that responded to the survey euthanatize animals with an IV injection of sodium pentobarbital, and 2 (5%) shelters indicated that they euthanatize unwanted animals in carbon monoxide gas chambers. After the animals are euthanatized, shelters generally have 3 ways to dispose of the carcasses. Eighteen (41%) shelters indicated that they operated their own crematories or paid private cremation companies to dispose of the bodies. One Colorado shelter paid \$52,000 for a new crematory in 1992.^f Cost of each cycle is about \$75.00, and a typical cycle can accommodate a dozen dogs and cats. Cycle duration varies, depending on the age and efficiency of the crematory. It takes several hours for the crematory to get hot enough to burn, and a few more hours to incinerate the bodies sufficiently. The Colorado shelter usually cremated bodies twice a day.

Not every shelter can afford to purchase its own

crematory. Twenty-one (48%) shelters disposed of the bodies by paying local haulers to bury them in landfills. This method is less expensive than cremation; a Houston, Tex shelter spent about \$1,150 in 1993 to dispose of bodies in this manner.

Six (14%) shelters indicated that they use the services of rendering companies to dispose of the bodies. A Chicago shelter pays a rendering company \$50.00/load of carcasses.⁵

Employees were not asked directly about their involvement with carcass disposal, but many participated in this process. In a Colorado shelter where the author was employed, workers were assigned to cremation duties once a week. In a New York state shelter, a worker drove the bodies to a local crematory for disposal. Other shelter employees assist haulers with body removal.⁶ One worker described his experience as "very stressful and difficult."

Employee reaction to euthanasia—Shelter workers may experience considerable emotional anguish from participation in animal euthanasias. People who work in animal shelters generally do so because of their love for animals. Therefore, when they are required to participate in euthanasia, shelter workers often feel conflict.

Shelter workers wrote about their sadness associated with euthanasias in the essay responses to our survey. The painful aspect of destroying a healthy animal was expressed by a shelter employee who said, "I love taking care of animals, and it breaks my heart to feed them, take care of their medical needs, only to have to turn around and euthanize them."

Kennel managers have to decide which animals to save and which ones to euthanatize. Their decisions may be based on how much space is left in the kennel, rather than on an animal's health, age, or temperament. One worker responded, "To make a decision to end a life is the hardest decision I have ever made." Similar feelings were shared by another employee who reported, "It bothers me to decide to kill an animal because it is a black dog and we have 3 black dogs waiting for homes." The conflict over killing healthy animals was described by 1 shelter worker who said, "Some days I hate myself for being a part of it."

Although the euthanasia process may involve a brief period of the workers' day, shelter workers are often left with sadness and unresolved grief. Sometimes, professional assistance is warranted. One kennel manager said, "I entered therapy in the beginning of June and am being medicated for severe depression. Much of my anger, guilt, frustration, and outright sadness is connected to my work and my passion for wanting to save the animals I kill." Another worker also reported that she is being treated for depression with medication. A shelter worker had attempted suicide in 1992 because she was unable to cope with her profound depression.⁵

Many shelter workers indicated that they cried as a way of coping with euthanasias. One director of a small humane society said, "I always cry, sooner or later. Somehow it makes me feel better." Another worker said, "I have a lot of sleepless nights, a lot of

crying." One employee confessed, "I've had breakdowns in the euthanasia room. I feel so helpless."

Other shelter workers reported feeling guilty because they have euthanized so many healthy, and often young, dogs and cats. One employee said, "I sometimes go home thinking I am a murderer."

On the other hand, some shelter employees have little or no emotional feelings about euthanasia. One worker, who has been in his job for 16 years, said, "I have no feelings about euthanasia. It doesn't bother me. I've been at it too long." Other workers try to block their feelings, as evidenced by an employee who reported that "I don't let it bug me when people call me a dog killer." Another worker said, "I try not to let myself feel any emotions and try to rationalize any feelings that do occur." Other people try to avoid dealing with euthanasia. One employee wrote, "I sometimes pretend it never happened." A veterinarian who works with a shelter reported, "I consciously shut off most of my emotions and proceed in a calm and methodical manner."

To cope with euthanasias, some workers do not become attached to the animals in their shelters. One worker said, "I do not get too personally involved, so I can't say that it hurts me." Another employee indicated, "I have been here long enough to know not to get attached to the animals, but sometimes I still do."

Employees also try to justify euthanasia of unwanted animals by comparing it to other disturbing alternatives, such as abuse, neglect, and abandonment. One shelter worker reported that, "a calm, fast, humane death has to be better than the lives most of our strays were living." Another worker shared this viewpoint, saying "there are a lot of worse things that can happen to an animal than being euthanized by me."

Many of the shelter workers said that they were able to cope with euthanasia when the animal was old, sick, injured, or wild. One worker said, "I hate to see the suffering, and euthanasia ends their suffering peacefully." Another reported that "Euthanasia on sick or injured animals does not bother me, because I am relieving them of their pain." Shelter workers may feel relief when they are able to end an animal's pain, as evidenced in 1 employee's report of her feelings when she euthanized a severely injured dog: "I realized what loving an animal really was—being able to put them to sleep when needed."

Some of the employees who responded to the survey spoke of their anger toward the public for their role in the overpopulation of unwanted dogs and cats. Donald and Powell⁶ contend that shelter workers face a public that is quick to condemn them for the job that they do, yet slow to accept responsibility for creating the conditions that make such euthanasias necessary. This anger was expressed by a shelter worker who said, "My anger goes to people who refuse to acknowledge their part in this crisis." Another employee indicated, "I am tired of being responsible for society's carelessness." One worker, who has been at her job for 7 years, reported, "One of the worst things about euthanizing animals is the anger it generates within me."

The anger and rage expressed by several employees is also disturbing. One shelter employee said, "I

think the owner or caretakers need to be killed." Some employees experience nightmares and sleep disturbances. An employee who has worked at her shelter for more than 7 years reported, "I've dreamed of euthanizing my own pets; of being told to euthanize old people sent to the shelter from nursing homes." Another indicated that "the nightmares are getting to become something I do not think I can deal with much longer."

Some employees reported physical problems, such as a veterinarian who said, "I overeat, am stressed, have high blood pressure and an ulcer. Also, I have difficult relationships with others." A worker who had only been employed at the shelter for a month reported that "when forced to participate, I feel dizzy and have come very close to passing out on a few occasions."

Frustration also was evident in the essays written by shelter workers. One worker said, "I frequently tell people that it is easier for me to euthanize an animal than talk to the person who brought it in." Many people surrender their pets because of frivolous reasons. Some of the reasons given by people surrendering their pets to a humane society were "it keeps having litters," "it's a mutt," "it didn't match the decor," "they (dogs) cause rats," "too old," and "is too playful." When confronted with such situations, which are routine in animal shelters, workers often become angry and frustrated because they may have to euthanize these animals.

Because of the stress shelter workers may face on a daily basis, they have developed various coping mechanisms to deal with their jobs. Some of them reported using "sick" humor as a way of letting go of the tension and frustration they experience. One humane society worker reported that she and her co-workers "tell sick jokes that only people in the profession can understand." Others said that they took out their frustrations on family members or friends. One shelter employee reported, "I get in bad moods after every euthanasia session." Some workers reported using physical exercise as a way of relieving their stress. One worker reported that he goes home after work and gives more attention to his own pets. Schroeder⁸ said of animal shelter workers, "...almost everyone has pets of their own—often several—upon whom they lavish their off-duty affection."

Many employees said that they shared a strong emotional bond with their co-workers. One shelter worker indicated, "We are like family, so it helps to have each other." Because so few people experience euthanasia as a regular part of their work routine, shelter workers rely on each other for acceptance and to share their pain and emotional anguish. Employees reported that they could talk about euthanasia only with co-workers, veterinarians, or other animal shelter employees. However, 1 shelter worker said that she alienated herself from "almost everyone."

Although a few employees indicated that they were not bothered by animal euthanasias, most respondents had strong negative feelings about their participation in such procedures, particularly when the animals are young and healthy. Employees most commonly reported feeling angry, frustrated, and depressed because of their jobs. Some workers developed

coping mechanisms, such as informal support networks, to help them deal with their feelings, whereas others internalized their anger and frustration. Some employees experienced prolonged periods of grief, which may be difficult to resolve because of the ongoing nature of euthanasia in animal shelters. Because participation in the survey was voluntary, it is possible that only employees with strong feelings about euthanasia and overpopulation were motivated to respond.

The Role of Mental Health Experts

Mental health workers can provide grief counseling, individually or in a group, to assist shelter employees with their sorrow and feelings of helplessness. Many of our surveyed workers said that they had not sought professional counseling on their own, but had participated in groups or seminars sponsored by their employers. Because almost all shelter workers have some feeling about euthanasia, even if they are not actively involved in the procedure, a group setting seems to be an ideal format in which to proceed. Talking about euthanasia among themselves in a safe environment appears to provide shelter workers with relief and assurance that someone else understands their sadness, anger, and frustration.

More mental health workers undoubtedly may be asked by shelter managers to conduct grief seminars or to lead support groups for employees who participate in euthanasia. Veterinarians can support and even sponsor these efforts. Group counseling under the guidance of a mental health professional also can help employees to empower themselves and to channel their anger into positive outcomes.

Extreme stress can exacerbate substance abuse problems. Employees who display signs of drug or alcohol abuse or who have a known substance abuse problem should be strongly encouraged to seek professional help for the problem. Anyone with known dependence on alcohol or drugs may be a poor candidate to participate in euthanasias.

The Role of Veterinarians

Veterinarians may experience the same responses to euthanasia as do other shelter workers, and yet are often asked to counsel such workers on this subject. The following recommendations include ways that veterinarians can help shelter workers cope with euthanasia.

- Be sensitive and compassionate in the euthanasia

room. Kennel staff will likely look to you for direction.

- Work with shelter management to establish a euthanasia committee, so that all employees and volunteers are fully aware of the technical aspects involved in the euthanasia process. In addition, a euthanasia committee can serve to monitor employee reaction to euthanasia, to prevent shelter workers from having to cope with emotional stress on their own.
- Educate the public about the overpopulation of unwanted animals. Veterinarians are in a unique position to share their views with pet owners about the importance of responsible pet ownership and spaying and neutering.
- Seek the support of mental health professionals in helping yourself and others to cope with euthanasia.

*Shelters were selected from the American Humane Association Directory, American Humane Association, Englewood, Colo.

^bMinnesota Valley Humane Society survey, Aug 1993, Burnsville, Minn.

^cOregon Humane Society survey, Aug 1993, Portland, Ore.

^dMassachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals survey, Aug 1993, Springfield, Mass.

^eHouston Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals survey, Aug 1993, Houston, Tex.

^fHarris L, Leslie L, Humane Society, Boulder, Colo: Personal communication, 1993.

^gStern J, Anti-Cruelty Society, Chicago, Ill: Personal communication, 1993.

^hOlney SK, Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, Tompkins County, NY: Personal communication, 1993.

References

1. Ellis BJ. *Paws for thought: a look at the conflicts, questions, and challenges of animal euthanasia*. Columbia, SC: Paw Print Press, 1993.
2. The Humane Society of the United States. *Pet overpopulation fact sheet*. Washington, DC: The Humane Society of the United States, 1992.
3. Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. *Stop pet overpopulation*. Boston, Mass: Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, 1987.
4. Kanner B. A dog's life: love and death at the ASPCA. *New York Magazine* 1992 Apr 27:46-53.
5. Will E. What is the human toll? Shelter workers pay a price for humane duty. *Denver Post* 1992 Jan 2:1E.
6. Donald RL, Powell C. A piece of us dies every time. *Shelter Sense* 1989 Nov:1-4.
7. The Humane Society of the Treasure Coast Inc. Why owners give up their pets. *Wagging Tales* 1993 Mar:4.
8. Schroeder DH. *Animal control workers: ordinary people, extraordinary stress*. Employee Assistance Program, 1992;30-32.