

their unneutered pets outside, where they do breed. Pet overpopulation is not the millions of surplus animals born each year, but one animal or one litter turned in, given away, sold, abandoned, or no longer cared for. This correlation is rarely understood by individuals turning in, giving away, selling, or abandoning their animals.

The challenge for animal shelters and others concerned about this issue is to reach people before they reach the point of giving up their pet, before they allow their pets to breed, and, in many cases, before they make the decision to get a pet in the first place. This effort is being made not only by animal shelters, but by concerned individuals—many of whom are veterinarians—who are com-

mitted to educating people about the realities of pet overpopulation. This is not a “shelter problem” but a community problem. Working together, we can and are making a difference.

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## Coping with euthanasia: A case study of shelter culture

Arnold Arluke, PhD

Discussions of the euthanasia of shelter animals typically focus on topics such as the number of animals killed, the rationale for killing them, or the methods used to accomplish this aim. Although these topics obviously merit study, the human side of euthanasia is frequently ignored; yet, euthanasia may be a stressful event for thousands of shelter workers whose autobiographic and anecdotal accounts clearly underscore this point.<sup>1-3</sup> Social scientists, however, have been remiss in studying the shelter workers' experience of euthanasia, ignoring this subject even in book-length treatments of the euthanasia of animals.<sup>4</sup> Cochran's recent analysis<sup>5</sup> to remedy this dearth in the literature by confirming the stress-inducing nature of euthanasia, although the ways in which workers cope with it were beyond the design of his research.

Especially for newcomers, euthanasia may represent a moral stress<sup>6</sup> or conflict between their caring for and interest in animals and their rationalization of euthanasia as a way of dealing with pet overpopulation. According to the sociologic literature on small groups, workers may try to informally

manage this stress. When individuals confront similar problems and interact with each other, they develop a shared perspective or culture that provides group members with ways of viewing and acting toward these problems. Rather than eliminating the problems, the culture provides strategies for managing them. Research reported in this article sought to explore how shelter culture helped workers cope with the moral stress of euthanasia.

### Methods

An ethnographic study was done of a single “kill” shelter serving a major metropolitan area. Such a case study seemed warranted, given the sensitivity of the topic under study. It was assumed that subjects needed to feel comfortable with the researcher before they would open up in interviews and allow themselves to be freely observed. To this end, I became immersed in one site over several months. Approximately 75 hours were spent in direct observation of all facets of shelter work and life, including euthanasia of animals and training shelter workers how to do it. Also, the entire staff of 16 people was interviewed, many formally and at length on tape, about euthanasia and related aspects of shelter work. These interviews were open-ended and semistructured, allowing workers to

From the Department of Sociology/Anthropology, College of Arts and Sciences, 360 Huntington Ave, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115.

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explore and elaborate their thinking and feeling without being unduly constrained by the limits of a formal questionnaire.

Of course, ethnographic analysis is inevitably subjective, but it is no less rigorous than epidemiologic study; the former is subject to the same biases as the latter. Good ethnographic analysis gets under the skin of subjects and identifies trends and patterns among groups that can then be evaluated. Two forms of validation are possible; strong reactions from insiders tend to validate ethnographic findings, or researchers can come into the same situation and restudy the setting. In the case of this research, the former has already occurred. However, informal responses have suggested that the management at the site chosen for this study may be more concerned about how its workers deal with euthanasia than is true in many shelters. Nevertheless, many of the components of shelter culture that are described in this article will no doubt be recognizable to shelter workers.

In ethnographic work, data are rarely tabulated. Instead, general magnitude levels (eg, "a few," "most") are used rather than summary statistics. The following list couples these terms with their percentage approximations: rare = 5%; few = 10%; some = 11 to 20%; many = 21 to 50%; most = 50 to 80%; vast majority  $\geq$  81%.

## Results

First, shelter culture served to ease newcomers into performing euthanasia. As "animal people" or "animal lovers," most new workers came to this shelter expecting to spend much of their time having hands-on contact with animals in a setting where others shared the same high priority they placed on human-animal interaction. They did not give much thought to the fact that they would be expected to kill animals; in some cases, they did not even know that euthanasia took place in the shelter. To be thrust into euthanasia without warning or preparation would have heightened whatever conflict they felt about killing animals.

The process of getting used to the idea of euthanasia started the moment applicants made contact with the shelter. When they phoned the shelter regarding employment, prospective workers were asked how they felt about euthanasia. By immediately broaching the subject, those strongly opposed to or very uncomfortable with euthanasia were culled from the applicant pool, whereas others had the thought planted in their minds. Then, at their first job interviews, prospective workers were again reminded about the shelter's euthanasia policy. For the moment though, many put it out of their minds because they were more concerned about getting hired. The full weight of euthanasia did not hit the vast majority until they "looked the animal in its eyes."

Once hired, novices observed and considered euthanasia long before actually doing it. They were

given the opportunity to air their conflicts about killing animals, and to watch and then assist more experienced workers doing it. At these moments, they saw most animals, particularly dogs, die calmly without visible agony from the euthanasia drug. Dogs were first given an anesthetic, leading one worker to say, "It isn't like you are killing them, because they don't die right away like the cats." When it was time to kill their first animals, many workers assisted but did not actually inject the euthanasia drug, perhaps taking the animals to the euthanasia room or holding the animals for injection. Black humor also helped to ease newcomers into euthanasia. Such humor reduced tension by acknowledging death as part of the setting, but also minimizing, for the moment, its tragedy and finality. Finally, workers were reminded that they should go at their own pace and not undertake euthanasia until they felt ready to do so.

Second, shelter culture focused workers' attention on the technical aspects of euthanasia so that, at least momentarily, other thoughts could be shut out. Senior shelter workers encouraged novices to focus not on death *per se*, but on their specific jobs as they carried out euthanasia. They were taught to become completely absorbed in the mechanics of killing in order to do it correctly.

Newcomers learned that euthanasia required 2 technical skills, performing injections and controlling animals. Both were taught as special skills that could be done well or poorly, but which certainly must not be taken for granted. Workers began to compartmentalize the technical act from the larger event of killing. This compartmentalizing was reflected in worker argot, which referred to injecting as "shooting," the person injecting as the "shooter," controlling the animal as "holding," and the person controlling the animal as the "holder."

Senior workers emphasized the importance of learning to shoot and hold correctly so that euthanasia was done well and animals were killed quickly and painlessly. Technical proficiency became something that one wanted to acquire for the animals' sake. In turn, to become very good at euthanasia became something that workers learned to feel pride about, at least in the shelter context.

Third, shelter culture defined the killing of animals as a humane act in several ways. In one respect, euthanasia was seen as a way to reduce animal suffering. As one worker observed, "I don't like any part of doing euthanasia, but I think it is more humane than letting them die on the streets. I'd rather kill than see suffering—I've seen dogs hung in allies, cats with firecrackers in their mouths or caught in car fan belts. This helps me cope with euthanating—to prevent this suffering through euthanasia. It's not the worst thing. It's probably a big relief for the animal. You know, you are doing it for a reason."

Killing was defined as humane for reasons other than ending the immediate physical suffering of animals. Death was seen as preferable to animals living under certain circumstances, even if they were healthy. For example, remaining in the shelter for a long time was viewed as worse than death for animals, because they were confined in cages and the shelter setting was thought to be highly stressful to animals. Newcomers also learned that placing animals in bad homes, even though the animals would live, was not more desirable than death.

Humane euthanasia, to shelter workers, referred to more than the purpose of death; it entailed consideration for the animals' experience of dying. One worker noted, "We try to make it (euthanasia) loving. They get more love in the last few seconds than they ever did. You don't want their last memory of life to be put in a cage and stuck. It makes me feel better making it (euthanasia) better for the animal." Workers were encouraged to "think of all the little things" that could reduce animals' stress, such as covering their cages in the receiving area, keeping men away (if they were afraid of men), putting a blanket on the chrome euthanating table, encouraging cats to come out of cages on their own accord rather than pulling them out, not mixing cats and dogs together, and not talking.

Fourth, shelter culture involved a moral shift. Shelter workers learned to shift moral responsibility for killing animals away from themselves to people outside the shelter who were seen as creating the necessity for euthanasia. The main targets of this shift were negligent owners who created pet overpopulation by failing to spay or neuter animals and uncaring owners who surrendered animals to the shelter for questionable reasons. As one worker put it, "The public, not euthanasia, is the problem. People continually try to make us feel guilty, but we shouldn't feel this. It is not our fault that there is an overpopulation of animals. It is just because people don't want their animals anymore." Another worker said, "People who own pets have put us in this position."

Rather than mull over the morality of their own participation in euthanasia, workers concentrated, almost with a sense of mission, on combating pet overpopulation that others have caused—whether it was in the effort they put into adoption or into public education. They could feel part of a serious campaign against a formidable foe—the pet owner—in defense of animals. What loomed large was not the act of euthanasia, but a sense of being overwhelmed by a never-ending flow of animals, often characterized as a battle or flood, coming into the shelter, that would always far exceed what was possible to adopt out.

Surrendering pet owners and the general public, however, were not the only ones that shelter workers held responsible for the euthanasias they did. The moral shift regarding the killing of animals

also focused on workers in no-kill shelters, although to a far lesser degree than on pet owners. Kill-shelter workers wondered how their peers in no-kill shelters could feel comfortable rejecting unadoptable animals, knowing full well that others would have to euthanize them. "No-kill shelters are very picky," noted one worker, "and I think that's not fair."

Fifth, shelter culture served to admit workers into an inner community once they performed euthanasia. According to shelter workers, it was ironic that they did the dirty work created by others, but got very little sympathy or understanding from them. Instead, the vast majority of workers felt criticized and misunderstood by outsiders who questioned their feelings for animals or became angry at them for euthanizing. "Even my friends and roommates can't handle what I do. I can't figure out why they can't see where I'm coming from," lamented one worker who said she had become "paranoid" about being asked if she killed animals. Workers claimed that they were commonly asked, "How can you kill them if you care about animals so much?" Sometimes people would simply tell workers, "I love animals; I couldn't do that." Such questions and comments, one worker claimed, "make me feel like I've done something wrong." Another worker said, "So what does it mean—I don't love animals?" If workers were not explicitly criticized or misunderstood, they sometimes still encountered people who made them feel reluctant to talk about their work. One worker noted, for instance, that "I'm proud that I am a 90% shot, and that I'm not putting the animals through stress, but people don't want to hear this." Many workers would not divulge that they did euthanasia because of these reactions. One worker, for instance, said that she has learned to tell people that she "drives an animal ambulance."

While these reactions made workers feel distanced from outsiders, workers were simultaneously brought into the shelter community. No single act admitted them more into this community than doing euthanasia. In a certain respect, learning to kill animals was a rite of passage that marked the transition of shelter workers out of the role of novice. As their experience with euthanasia increased, workers developed a sense of being in the same boat with peers who also euthanized. They shared an unarticulated belief that others could not really understand what it was like to euthanize unless they had also killed a dog or cat. As one worker reflected, "It does feel like you can't understand what I do if you can't understand that I don't like to kill, but that I have to kill and see it as humane—you'd have to see what I see." Because outsiders had not euthanized animals, workers tended to give them little credibility and to discount their opinions. By curtailing the possibility of understanding what they did and communicating with others about it, workers furthered their soli-

clarity and created boundaries between themselves and outsiders.

Sixth, shelter culture considered attachment to be normative. Staff members could not conceive of the absence of attachments, and they naturally formed them as "an important part of the job." Workers spoke of having "favorites," of wanting to adopt some animals themselves, and of having special feelings for the entire lot of animals in their charge. The issue was not whether people would feel attached, but how they could protect themselves emotionally from broken bonds because these animals would be killed or would leave the shelter.

Assuming positive outcomes in uncertain situations regarding the animals' fates was one protective strategy. For example, when some workers came into the shelter after a day off, they did not ask what happened to their favorites when their cages were empty, so they could assume that they had been adopted rather than killed.

Another strategy was to lessen the intensity and frequency of such attachments by assuming a caretaking role regarding shelter animals rather than a pet owner's role—the latter being more common among novices. As one worker revealed, "You don't set yourself up by seeing them as pets. You'd kill yourself. I'd cut my wrists. I'm a caretaker, so I make them feel better while they are here. They won't be forgotten so quickly. I feel I get to know them. I'm their last hope." As caretakers, workers believed it was important that they were the ones on the job, because someone else might not give the animals as much love and attention as they would.

Staff members could also assume the role of the animal social worker, whose efforts focused on adoption screening. Rather than forming their own attachments to shelter animals, they found satisfaction in seeing future attachments between their animals and adopters. As one worker commented, "For every one euthanatized, you have to think about the one placed, or the one case where you placed it in a perfect family."

Workers also refocused their attachments onto shelter mascots. Mascots appeared to be very important in this context because people cared for animals and easily formed attachments to them, and yet saw many of the animals in their charge die after days or weeks in the shelter or leave through adoption. Having mascots may have provided a safe outlet for such feelings of caring and attachment, because they would not be euthanatized and remained in the shelter for a long time.

The seventh and final component of shelter culture was to adapt the euthanasia routine to accommodate concerns of the workers. Rather than opposing or constraining workers' interest in animals, the shelter's organization respected this side of workers, allowing them to further confirm that they were caring people. More specifically, the shelter granted workers some influence over the

euthanasia selection process and, some say, over the nature of their participation in the act.

Selecting animals to be euthanatized allowed workers, to some extent, to express their feelings about particular animals, such that their death was postponed, with the hope of adoption. Shelter workers sometimes spotted animals that stood out from others because of personality or appearance and moved to delay euthanasia despite the fact that they were too young, too old, sick, or a behavioral problem—factors that did not augur well for good adoptions and normally led to euthanasia. The selection process was also influenced by workers who became particularly attached to certain animals. Workers with "favorites" scheduled to be euthanatized sometimes sought to postpone their deaths.

When it came to doing euthanasia, work could be modified too. Those in charge of the shelter were sensitive to the difficulty of euthanatizing animals with whom workers were attached. Workers especially attached to animals scheduled to be euthanatized were not forced to carry out the euthanasia or even to assist with it. They could opt out entirely by not being present when euthanasia was done. If present, they could elect not to inject the euthanasia drug, and instead hold the animal because they were more comfortable doing this.

In short, the shelter's organization was responsive to the most sensitive and conflict-ridden aspect of shelter work—killing animals. Workers were allowed some influence over the process of selecting animals for euthanasia and were given a certain degree of autonomy over the task itself, including what role, if any, they assumed.

## Conclusions

Findings from this study help to explain the apparent contradiction that "animal people" can kill animals. Workers adapted to the kill shelter by clinging to a sense of themselves as animal people engaged in a mission larger than merely killing animals. By seeing their acts as a type of crusade for animals and against an ignorant public, their killing was given moral if not political meaning. By claiming for themselves the stance of combatants of pet overpopulation and providers of humane death, workers placed their killing in a dignified and medical category of euthanasia. In the middle of the death they brought about, they had the noble function of being the last ones who could make a difference in the animals' lives—whether it was to get them into good homes or to make their final days comfortable and loving. At the same time, each shelter worker could oppose euthanasia while actually orchestrating it. No one liked or wanted to do it, and everyone agreed that there was no other alternative to the situation they faced. All of these efforts allowed them to feel that they acted in accordance with their consciences. It was a group that struggled to maintain its conscience and it did this successfully.

Of course, shelter culture did not erase all the



moral stress of euthanasia. In some cases, it failed to even provide enough equanimity to remain on the job. Components of this culture, such as seeing "successes" in adoption efforts, helped allay conflict, but workers also realized that the larger problem of overpopulation would not diminish. Although many reasons commonly are advanced for turnover among shelter workers—low pay, hard work, little advancement—one that must be added to the list is the failure of their culture to lessen sufficiently the moral stress they feel.

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# The economics of spaying and neutering: Market forces and owners' values affecting pet population control

Priscilla K. Stockner, MS, DVM, MBA

The surgical neutering of adult animals by veterinarians is the most common form of pet population control. If pups and kittens can be safely neutered at 2 to 3 months of age, prepubertal surgical neutering of pets may gain acceptance by the veterinary profession. The development of nonsurgical methods to neuter pets may change market trends and owner acceptance of surgical neutering. We must resolve some economic issues that will assure veterinarians' willingness to continue to participate in any solution to pet population growth.

## Veterinary Economics

An "economic good" is a service or commodity that can be utilized to satisfy human wants and needs—and has an exchange value. Surgical neutering could be defined as an economic good, depending on one's definition of exchange value. Exchange value could be immediate monetary gain, the future potential of monetary gain with establishment of a new client, or no monetary gain, but with personal satisfaction in assisting to solve a community problem of pet overpopulation. It is not known or generally agreed on that surgical neutering is economically sound. Although the veterinary profession is providing animals with good health

care, the perceived value of veterinary care in the eyes of the public may not be commensurate.<sup>1</sup>

Veterinarians may define exchange value differently, frequently being confused about pricing services and products, and in generating, distributing, and using income. Most would define exchange value in terms of dollars, pricing a service or product by using "rules of thumb" information, "the going rate," or various distributed "mark-up" tables. Private practitioners may apply information from colleagues and clients about the value of a service in relation to its price. Some veterinarians network with other businesspersons, extrapolating information received to their practice situation. Unfortunately, accurate methods of cost accounting and making business decisions may not be utilized by many practicing veterinarians, nor is it taught as part of the curriculum at most veterinary colleges.

## Decision Making in Veterinary Medicine

Any discussion of economics must start with how business decisions are being made by veterinarians. Practitioners try to choose the course of action that is most effective in attaining their personal and practice goals. When judging the effectiveness of various decision options, a measuring unit needs to be used. Most often that measuring unit is dollars. Decision situations can be classified 3 ways:

From the Veterinary Management Services, 340 State Pl, Escondido, CA 92029.