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## Gimme Shelter: Penn Begins Shelter Animal Medicine Program

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## Penn begins Shelter Animal Medicine Program

BY GAIL LUCIANI

**T**he statistics are staggering. Each year, millions of unwanted pets are born in this country. According to the Humane Society of the United States, one female cat and her offspring can produce as many as 420,000 cats in seven years; a female dog and her offspring can produce 67,000 dogs in six years.

Animal shelters take in an estimated eight to 10 million animals each year, half of which, sadly, are euthanized for lack of permanent, caring homes, because of preventable behavior problems—or for nothing more than lack of space.

The pet overpopulation problem is very real in the city of Philadelphia. The Philadelphia Animal Care and Control Association (PACCA), under the auspices of the city's Department of Health, is responsible for animal control. It urgently needs assistance neutering dogs and cats to be put up for adoption. By conservative estimates, the facility receives between 11,000 and 21,000 animals annually that have been surrendered by city residents or picked up as strays. Of these, only 33 percent of the potentially adoptable animals are placed in homes (about 4,000 to 4,600 per year). The rest are euthanized.

What is the role of the veterinary profession when it comes to pet overpopulation and the care of animals in shelters? In the past, the shelter and veterinary disciplines were often at odds when it came to ideology, business practices and even agreement on what was best for animals. Over time, various social, economic and philosophical factors contributed to the evolution of a new cooperative environment. Interest in shelter animal medicine stirred in the past decade and continues to increase today. In addition to pro bono spay/neuter work performed by veterinarians across the country, veterinary schools are taking a hard look at how they can ensure their students understand issues associated with pet overpopulation.

As a discipline, shelter animal medicine is relatively new, covering many areas of both veterinary care and shelter management. Veterinary care encompasses population health, preventive medicine, epidemiology and infectious disease diagnosis, treatment and prevention, including appropriate vaccination. Behavioral assessment, treatment and counseling are critical components to increasing adoption rates at shelters. From the shelter management perspective, components include structural design, facilities management (including disinfection), community education and outreach, and management, marketing and public relations.

Today, some form of shelter animal medicine is taught at veterinary colleges or schools at Cornell, UC Davis, Auburn, Iowa State, Oklahoma State and Ohio State. Penn will begin its own shelter animal medicine program in the spring of 2006. It will impact all students, ensuring they not only master certain surgical techniques, but also learn about other issues facing companion-animal veterinarians and animal shelters, including emergency medicine, infectious disease, parasitology and behavior. And the surgical component, once implemented, could directly increase the number of companion animals spayed and neutered in the Philadelphia area.

“The School has been working with PACCA to obtain spay dogs for junior and senior surgery classes since 2002,” said **Dr. David Holt**, chief of surgery and Shelter Animal Medicine committee member. “Though the relationship with PACCA has been strained in the past, changes in PACCA management have led to a more productive relationship.”

This relationship is critical to the success of the program, because not only it will significantly enhance the surgical experience and skills of graduating students, it will also improve the adoptability of more than 1,000 of the dogs and cats received at PACCA every year.

To strengthen the relationship between the School and PACCA, Matthew J. Ryan Veterinary Hospital Director **Barry Stupine** recently joined PACCA’s Board of Directors. “As one of the only veterinary schools in an urban location, our active participation in animal welfare issues in the city is critical to our mission of teaching, healing and research,” he said.

The new program will impact every student at the School, from the addition of four hours to the core curriculum to elective lab courses that could be held at PACCA in the second or third year. PACCA has a never-ending supply of incoming animals with common problems, including dermatitis, cuts, bruises, ear infections, diarrhea and so forth, most of which are not often seen at the Ryan Hospital. In addition, a senior spay/neuter rotation would allow students to acquire more direct surgery experience, and an externship available in the senior year would allow other areas of shelter animal medicine to be studied in depth.

“While the academic focus of the program will be pet overpopulation, our program encompasses several important areas of potential study, including the interaction of animals and society and animal behavior, both of which are already disciplines within the School,” said Shelter Animal Medicine committee chair **Dr. Chuck Newton**, deputy associate dean. “The program would expose veterinary students to an important aspect of urban veterinary medicine that is not currently part of the curriculum. And a core teaching concept from the Shelter Animal Medicine program is the importance of pro bono work in the practice of any veterinarian.”

While effective spay/neuter programs are critical in the battle against pet overpopulation, the corresponding component is adoption. “Students in the junior surgery course have traditionally been very interested in ensuring their spay dogs are adopted,” said Dr. Holt. “To make that easier, we’re now allowing students to adopt PACCA dogs directly, so that they do not have to return to the shelter.” In addition, the School cooperates with all shelters in the city, and has recently joined the Alliance for Philadelphia’s Animals to help ensure the objectives of this component of the pet overpopulation equation are met successfully.

A world-class Shelter Animal Medicine faculty, coupled with a renovated student surgery suite and a partnership with city shelters, will ensure the School continues to provide the highest quality of education to future veterinarians, who as a result, will be better prepared to enter the profession and practice veterinary medicine, whether in private practices or in shelters. By partnering with the major players in animal welfare in Philadelphia and beyond, the School will not only develop a model program for students, it will be the force behind the rescue of the lives of thousands of adoptable animals in this city. 🐾

