

Reducing Animal Overpopulation



By Lisa Dubé Forman

Numbers are regularly tossed around like pennies into a fountain as to the quantity of dogs and cats entering US shelters each year. As claimed by the World Society for the Protection of Animals there are 6 to 8 million dogs and cats that enter shelters in the United States. Additionally, their research states that 3-4 million of these animals will be euthanized because of a lack of homes. The consensus is that this is due to overpopulation and that aggressive, spay/neutering programs need to be implemented to curb this tide.

To have an accurate picture, let's look at the overall numbers. According to the 2011-2012 American Pet Products Association (APPA) and their National Pet Owners Survey, there are 78.2 million dogs in American households. Parenthetically, expenditures from the same source indicate that 2012 was a banner year, an approximated 52.87 billion pet industry that has been growing consecutively.

Border Wars, a Border Collie manifesto states that new data released from ASPCA, HSUS and APPA shows that of the total population 78% of pet dogs are spayed or neutered and only 22% of pet dogs are intact. Yet, intact dogs account for 9 out of 10 shelter intakes. According to the same sources, as little as 2% of dogs die in shelters annually and this number has fallen steadily for decades — down from a high of nearly 25% of all dogs in the 1970s — crediting this significant decline to spay/neuter programs across the United States. This Border Wars website has performed detailed research into their numbers revealing a number of interesting facts. For example, of the total shelter annual intakes, approximately 2 million are from Hobby Breeders. Pet stores make up another half million but the largest segment of lost or abandoned dogs — an estimated 3.7 million — comes from the segment of dogs casually or indiscriminately bred by backyard breeders, friends, family, or dogs advertised in newspapers. Of the 2.5 to 3.5 million dogs entering shelters annually, 75% are mixed breeds and 25% are purebreds with the latter purebred population being 29% Pit Bulls. This overall topic is not unfamiliar territory for me as I wrote on the topic in the Canine Chronicle issue March 2011, where I tackled the economic model of supply and demand and pointed out society's shortcomings — the greatest supply source of abandoned dogs at shelters are John Q. Public. A sad declaration of our disposable, throw away society indeed but revealing statistics nonetheless. With a reported 75% being mixed breeds, this number disputes the urban legend that the majority of dog breeders are the reasons why dogs live and die in shelters.

A case control study published in the US National Library of Medicine has very thought-provoking realities. The researchers objective was to identify canine and household characteristics associated with relinquishment of a pet dog to an animal shelter. Their sample population were households that relinquished dogs for adoption (case households) and a random sample of current dog-owning households in the same community (control households). Risk Factors for Relinquishment of Dogs to an Animal Shelter results:

- “Potentially modifiable factors that explained the highest proportion of relinquishment were owners not participating in dog obedience classes after acquisition, lack of veterinary care, owning a sexually intact dog, inappropriate care expectations, and dogs having daily or weekly inappropriate elimination. Dogs obtained from shelters, kept in crates, or acquired at > or = 6 months of age were at increased risk of relinquishment. Greater purchase price was associated with decreased risk of relinquishment, but relinquishment was not associated with the degree of planning to acquire the dog. Dogs with behavioral problems and little veterinary care were at greater risk of relinquishment than were dogs with regular veterinary care, and behavioral problems were associated with inappropriate care expectations.”

This study's clinical implications are clear. I can only wish that all hobby dog breeders, those who casually and actively breed should endeavor to heed, regardless if purebreds are less likely to end up in shelters than mixed breeds.

- “Risk factors identified in this study can be modified by dog owners and veterinarians to decrease the estimated 2 million dogs euthanized annually in animal shelters. Veterinarians should educate owners about typical dog behavior, routine care requirements and training, and the importance of regular veterinary visits; should incorporate wellness concepts in their practice; and should focus on preventive medicine and behavioral consultation.”

Veterinarians aside, breeders can make a difference because 25% of purebreds entering shelters is too high. Be mindful of these recommendations that the clinical study revealed. Instruct, educate potential puppy owners as to breed behaviors and routine care to prevent potential problems in the future. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

In closing, the billionaire philanthropist Dr. Gary Michelson, and his Found Animals Foundation is offering cash incentives with the Michelson Grants and Michelson Prize to end our alleged and hyped overpopulation. The Michelson Grants are available for research in pursuit of a non-surgical sterilant for cats and dogs, up to \$250,000 per year, for up to 3 years of funding. The \$25 million Michelson Prize will be awarded to the first entity to develop the successful product. According to the LA Times, twenty-two teams of researchers are working on the sterilization “problem” already silencing genes and stimulating immune systems to try to shut down the reproductive cycle.

The crux is that hobby breeders need to make an intensive group effort to reduce the number of abandoned purebred dogs in shelters now. It is almost a given that we will wake up one morning to hear the news that Eureka! A noninvasive sterilant has been invented. What should then be of great concern to all of us is the delivery mechanism for this sterilant.

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