

Veterinary update

Dear Colleagues,

Small companion mammals including rats, rabbits, guinea pigs, etc. are popular pets and easy to obtain in British Columbia. While many of these animals are cherished and well cared for, there is a surplus. In fact, with dog intake trending downward and cat intake remaining steady, small mammal intake to BC SPCA shelters is increasing. In 2014, we took in 1,117 small mammals, but the past few years, we have taken in 1,700 to 1,800 per year.

As you know, these animals have special care needs. Whether your practice provides formal veterinary care for them or not, some of your clients are likely to have these pets at home and to ask you about them. The BC SPCA has small animal care sheets (spca.bc.ca/faqs/small-pet-care) for the public that you may wish to share. These sheets include information on housing, nutrition, handling and enrichment.

When these animals enter BC SPCA shelters, we strive to provide them with care that meets all of their needs according to the Five Freedoms of animal welfare (spca.bc.ca/faqs/five-freedoms), including the freedom to express behaviours that promote well-being. This may include species-specific needs like chewing, digging and climbing, as well as adequate space for exercise, stretching and seeking or avoiding social contact.

“Traditional” shelter housing for small mammals often involves small cages. We are moving beyond that, creating technical guidelines for all new small mammal housing that ensures that in any new build, we allow for species-specific needs. For example, rabbits will be housed in rabbit enclosures that met the welfare needs of rabbits by allowing them room to run and separate themselves from their housemate by a few body lengths, and to accommodate a hiding place and platform. In our existing shelters, we are trying to get as close to these guidelines as possible. When members of the public come into our shelters, we want them to encounter small mammals in species-appropriate settings that inspire even better setups in their own homes.

On the topic of rabbits, Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease (RHD) continues to be a challenge in B.C., particularly on the Island and in Lower Mainland locations. New cases were most recently reported in Saanich in September, but RHD was also reported in downtown Vancouver in June and in multiple mid-Island locations this spring. We urge veterinarians to remain vigilant in working with clients to recognize and prevent the spread of this disease by vaccinating as many rabbits as possible and seeking testing of any deceased suspect rabbits. For the latest on RHD in B.C. as well as client and shelter information sheets, visit spca.bc.ca/news/rhd.

Small mammals can be incredible companions. One needs only to search “training guinea pigs” or “rat basketball” online to see the intelligence and love these animals have to offer. You play a key role in ensuring clients have the information and veterinary resources to provide lifelong care for these special companions. With so many entering BC SPCA shelters and private rescues, we hope you will encourage your clients to choose adoption.



Happy fall and thanks for all you do,

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Do you have questions or feedback for the BC SPCA?

Please email us at outreach@spca.bc.ca

The British Columbia Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (BC SPCA) is a not-for-profit organization reliant on donations from the public.

Vet students inspired by shelter medicine at the BC SPCA



From left to right: Nita Hynes, Regan Schwartz, Ali Frye

The BC SPCA offers veterinary students the opportunity to complete a third year rotation working in shelter medicine. We spoke to three of these vet students, to learn more about their experience and how these rotations are informing their career paths.

What did your rotation at the BC SPCA entail? What did your work in the clinic specifically entail?

Regan: I worked multiple shifts in both the shelter and hospital environments, but was also given the opportunity to learn more about the other facets of the organization.

Nita: It was immensely varied. With Dr. Van Haaften, I participated in behaviour consults. With Dr. Gordon, I spent time in the public clinic and assisted with veterinary appointments, and paediatric spays and neuters. We also talked through different disease outbreak scenarios and the multimodal approach that is needed in shelters to resolve and prevent these outbreaks from recurring.

Ali: The work in the clinic entailed shadowing the veterinarians on duty. This ranged from assisting with general health exams, reviving kittens after an emergency c-section, euthanasias, vaccine administration, injured wildlife care and animal restraint. I was able to observe routine surgeries and assist with medical management and husbandry of patients.

What was your biggest take-away from your experience at the BC SPCA?

Regan: I was amazed by the sheer scope of work being done by the SPCA to better the lives of animals across B.C. It was a real eye opener to learn about all of the important programs and services being offered and to see the positive impact those programs are having on the communities.

Ali: For me, seeing the larger picture of how a veterinarian can have a positive impact on not only the shelter animals themselves but also the animals and people in low income situations was invaluable.

Nita: I have been passionate about animal behaviour and welfare even before veterinary school, so to focus on this for two weeks was a dream come true! I think the biggest takeaway was realizing that my interests within veterinary medicine actually came together really well in a shelter setting. I had never considered working as a shelter

veterinarian, partially because I saw myself more in equine practice or mixed practice, but I saw that shelters were an amazing opportunity for progressive and evidence-based approaches, preventative medicine, stress-free practices, and population health to come together. I saw an opportunity to make a difference on a large-scale in my future as a veterinarian.

How do you see your time at the BC SPCA applying to your future career?

Nita: After my rotation at the BC SPCA, I started looking into the shelter medicine career path. I recently obtained and started an internship in Seattle, and I am really excited about spending a year looking after all the shelter animals who come under my care.

Regan: I spent a day working at Charlie's Pet Food Bank during my rotation. These community initiatives make a big difference and I hope to support programs like these once I start practicing.

Ali: It solidified my desire to always be involved in shelter work as a veterinarian. I had the opportunity to network with many knowledgeable people in the shelter community, who have become great mentors.

What is next for you as a (soon-to-be) veterinarian?

Nita: I have thought about pursuing a residency in veterinary behaviour, and about continuing in shelter medicine. If I end up in private practice, I am sure that I will find myself involved in local shelter organizations to keep serving the community and the animals we love within them.

Regan: After graduation, I plan to finally move back to Vancouver to start my veterinary career. I look forward to all potential job opportunities.

Ali: Having recently graduated, I now work as a small animal veterinarian in a 24Hour Emergency hospital that works closely with the local animal shelter. I plan to continue my education in Veterinary Forensics over the next year to expand my knowledge into an area that allows me to better assist in cruelty investigations and animal welfare cases.

Practitioners toolbox

At the BC SPCA, we have a designated shelter veterinarian and veterinary behaviourist who are responsible for creating and updating evidence-based protocols for shelter animal treatment. Sometimes, these practices may differ from what is typically done in private practice. Have questions about when we would euthanize an animal for aggression or infectious disease, how we treat and screen for GI parasites, or the research behind pediatric spay/neuter? Visit the For Veterinarians section of our website at spca.bc.ca/programs-services/leaders-in-our-field/professional-resources/for-veterinarians/



Fear Free makes its way into shelters

In recent years, Fear Free has expanded course offerings from the original veterinary program. It now offers certification courses for professional dog trainers, groomers, and now: shelter & rescue employees & volunteers.

The shelter & rescue certification course launched in August 2019, and is offered free of charge to shelter and rescue employees & volunteers. If you work or volunteer with the BC SPCA or another rescue, you are eligible for free registration. To find out more visit: fearfreeshelters.com.

A link between stress behaviours & disease risk in animal shelters has been established in cats and dogs. Reducing stress in shelter animals has been shown to provide protection against many shelter-acquired illnesses, which is why the SPCA has strict housing standards including Hide, Perch, & Go™ boxes and portalized cages for cats, and Capacity for Care sheltering systems to prevent overcrowding and ensure adequate staff time for every animal. Additionally, helping animals experience good emotional welfare in the shelter environment improves their chances of connecting with adopters and having shorter lengths of stay in the shelter facility.

The Fear Free sheltering course trains shelter staff & volunteers to: recognize signs of fear, anxiety, and stress (FAS) in cats and dogs, optimize animal housing and handling to reduce FAS, and effectively and humanely change behaviour with rewards-based training. The course was developed by shelter & behaviour medicine experts specifically for sheltering staff and employees.

The BC SPCA is planning to incorporate this course into core training programs for staff and volunteers. Veterinarians and staff at BC SPCA veterinary hospitals are all Fear Free Level 1 certified. This course is a great resource for anyone interested in expanding their knowledge of the benefits and challenges of caring for the emotional well-being of animals in a sheltering environment.

BC SPCA Science & Policy newsletter

The BC SPCA recently published the Fall edition of the Science & Policy newsletter.

This biannual newsletter provides updates on the BC SPCA's Science & Policy Division, including scientific and academic initiatives, animal policy and welfare, legislation and current events.

To read, please visit: spca.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/Science-Policy-Newsletter-Fall-2019.pdf



Partnership opportunity

Do you have mobile accreditation for companion animal species and are interested in partnering with the BC SPCA to deliver programming? Contact us at outreach@spca.bc.ca.

Address community cats with help of BC SPCA grant funding

We are now accepting applications for the 2020 BC SPCA Community Animal Spay Neuter Grant Program.

This grant program assists communities working address the community cat population through spay and neuter. Veterinarians, as well as rescue groups, animal charities, municipalities, regional districts and First Nations governments are all eligible to apply.

As a veterinarian, you can apply for funding or sign on to be a veterinary partner for a group in your community that is applying. These important efforts in addressing cat overpopulation on the community level would not be possible without the support of veterinarians like yourself.

This year, priority will be given to projects in the Thompson-Nicola Regional District, Cariboo Regional District and Central Coast Regional District. The BC SPCA has identified these communities as in need of intervention to address the number of unwanted cats.

We fund the following two types of projects:

Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR)

Free Roaming Cats, defined as intact neighborhood or community-fed cats, abandoned cats, unfriendly or feral cats living in colonies, where there are one or more caretakers.

Cats on First Nation land

Owned and unowned cats that are cared for by owners/guardians in a First Nation community.

Find the application forms and more information at www.sPCA.bc.ca/spayneutergrant. The application deadline is January 1, 2020.

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