

## Case Report: Under-Socialized cats from an Animal Hoarding Case

By Dr. van Haften

In August 2017, 56 cats were surrendered to the BC SPCA from an ongoing cruelty investigation case. These cats had been living in an animal hoarding situation in overcrowded, filthy condition for several years.

Most cats were underweight (BCS 2-4/9), and were suffering from severe chronic upper respiratory disease (mycoplasma) and diarrhea (giardia). Seven were found to be in critical distress at the time of intake and were euthanized at that time. Twenty-one were found to be severely fearful of people to the point where they were considered unadoptable.

Fear of people in cats can be due to genetics, lack of socialization with people (especially during the critical socialization period in cats of 3-7 weeks of age), or previous negative experience with people. Since many of these cats appeared to be related, it's possible all 3 factors were involved with this case.

Every effort was made to ensure the cat's environment was as stress-free as possible by closing public access to these cat's ward, giving them access to hiding and perching opportunities, and adding visual blockers (curtains) to portalized cages.

A behavioural treatment plan was developed to help these cats build trusting relationships with people. The plan centered around a behaviour modification technique called Desensitization and Counter-Conditioning<sup>1</sup>, where the subject is exposed to a low level of the trigger (human presence/touch) at the same time as they receive something very rewarding (a high-value food treat). This pairing is repeated many times until the emotional response to the trigger changes to positive anticipation.

After 1 month of treatment, 7 of the 21 had gained enough trust with humans to be adoptable, but progress for the remaining 14 remained slow. These cats were still very fearful of people approaching them, and were only intermittently able to engage in training. It was suspected that this high level of fear was interfering with the cat's ability to learn.

A medication called gabapentin has recently been shown to have anxiolytic effects in cats<sup>2</sup>. Gabapentin was prescribed for these cats to be given once daily (in the morning) at 10mg/kg.

The medication was well tolerated by the cats, and progress with behaviour modification started improving again. Over the next 2 months, the remaining cats built trust with people and were made available for adoption. Gabapentin was weaned when the cats consistently enjoyed being pet by humans. Overall, 20/21 cats initially entered into the behaviour modification program were successfully adopted. One cat was euthanized for medical reasons.

During pre-adoption counselling, adopters were informed of these cat's history and potential ongoing behavioural challenges such as litter box training, and ongoing fear of novel experiences and environments. Gradual introductions to their new home were recommended, starting in a small, low-traffic room with ample hiding locations and resources. Most cats adjusted to their new homes post-adoption, though returns were made in a few cases. Returned cats were able to be successfully adopted to new homes in all cases.

This case shows there is potential for even severely fearful cats to learn to trust and live successfully with humans, though significant investment of time and resources is required. Fearful and under-socialized cats are a common challenge in animal shelters and resources on prognostic and treatment information is lacking in the scientific literature. The BC SPCA is interested in working on more cases like this and developing standardized treatment plans that could be helpful to a wide variety of sheltering organizations.

We would like to thank the amazing cat volunteers and staff at the BC SPCA Victoria branch who spent many hours and days working with these cats!

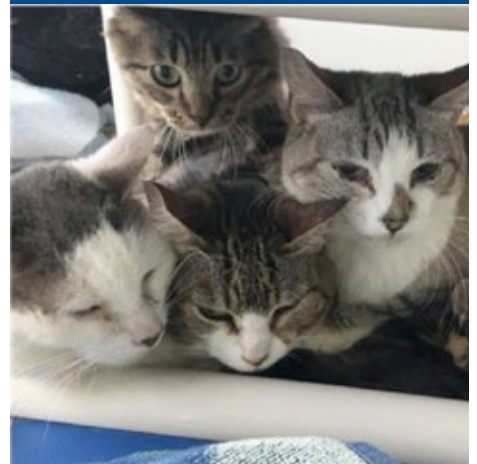
1. Poggiagliolmi, Sabrina. "Desensitization and Counterconditioning: When and How?." *Veterinary Clinics of North America: Small Animal Practice* (2018).
2. Pankratz, Katherine E., et al. "Use of single-dose oral gabapentin to attenuate fear responses in cage-trap confined community cats: a double-blind, placebo-controlled field trial." *Journal of feline medicine and surgery* (2017).

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### Contents:

Case Report: Under-Socialized cats from an Animal Hoarding Case	1
Meet the BC SPCA Senior Manager, Animal Behaviour & Welfare	2
BC SPCA Animal Behaviour Science Symposium	2
Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease in BC	3
Asilomar Accords Report	3
Update on efforts to ban cat declawing	4
Rabies control and management evaluation survey	4
AnimalKind Pest Control	4

*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.*



## BC SPCA Animal Behaviour Science Symposium

### DATE

June 2 – 3, 2018

### LOCATION

Executive Suites Hotel & Conference Center Metro Vancouver

### TICKETS

Early bird tickets available until May 15th! Visit: [spca.bc.ca/abss](http://spca.bc.ca/abss)

Featuring a world-renowned line-up of experts and animal behaviour professionals, the inaugural BC SPCA Animal Behaviour Science Symposium will provide a unique opportunity to learn about the art and science of behaviour modification and animal welfare.

Take part in a weekend of learning, networking, and fun as we learn from a highly qualified and diverse line-up of science-based animal trainers, veterinary consultants, and animal welfare professionals on topics relating to this year's theme: *Canine Anxiety*.

Continuing education credits available for veterinarians, registered veterinary technicians, and dog trainers. Please visit our website for more information.



## Meet Dr. Karen van Haaften, Senior Manager, Animal Behaviour & Welfare

**Dr. van Haaften** completed her veterinary degree at the Ontario Veterinary College at the University of Guelph. She began her career practicing small animal medicine in Ontario, Canada and Melbourne, Australia. A passion for animal behavior led her to a residency at the UC Davis Clinical Behavior team, where she worked from 2014-2017, and she joined the BC SPCA in September 2017.

### What is your role at the BC SPCA?

The primary part of my job is providing assistance to our branches with diagnostic and treatment assistance for behaviour cases in-care. I also work on cruelty cases, animal advocacy campaigns, and behavioural policy and resource development for the society.

### Can you tell us about as a vet how you got to specialize in behaviour?

I quickly discovered in practice that my patients suffered from as many psychological problems as medical ones. I felt my veterinary curriculum did not prepare me to accurately diagnose and treat pet behaviour problems I encountered in practice. Recognizing there were not enough veterinary behaviour specialists in Canada, I pursued a residency and board-certification.

### How do pet behaviour problems affect animal welfare?

Behaviour problems are a very common reason for pet relinquishment or euthanasia in North America. Even if animals with behaviour problems don't lose their lives or their homes, other welfare consequences are common, such as social isolation, limited lifestyles, and inhumane training methods.

### Why is animal behaviour knowledge important for veterinarians?

Veterinarians are crucial for preventing and treating common behavioural problems. Only veterinarians can fully understand the intersection between normal behaviour, the effects of disease, medications, and pain on behaviour, as well as the role of psychotropic medications and behaviour modification.

### What opportunities exist for practicing veterinarians in BC to learn more about the field of veterinary behaviour?

- The first Annual BC SPCA Animal Behaviour Science Symposium. The purpose of this conference is to bring together veterinary professionals, science-based animal trainers, and animal welfare scientists to discuss clinical animal behaviour problems.
- Fear Free™ and Low-Stress Handling™ certification programs provide detailed information on making visits to the veterinary clinic as pleasant as possible for patients. Science-based behaviour modification methods are taught in both programs.



## Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease in BC

Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease (RHD) was first reported in Nanaimo in February 2018. Since then it has been confirmed on Annacis island in Delta, as well as being suspected in the Courtenay-Comox area (tests pending at time of writing). The mortality rate is over 90% and hundreds of feral rabbits on the island have died.

RHD is caused by a calicivirus and has never before been reported in BC. All domestic rabbits are susceptible, so pet, shelter, sanctuary, show, and meat rabbits are at risk. Because feral European rabbits are considered wildlife in BC, the Ministry of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development is the lead agency.

The BC SPCA has temporarily suspended intake of rabbits into all Island and Lower Mainland shelters until the extent of the outbreak is known. Additional control measures are also in place restricting some animal transfers, implementing a rabbit quarantine period prior to adoption for Island and Lower Mainland shelters, and asking visitors to all BC SPCA shelters provincially who have been in affected areas to change clothing/ disinfect shoes and hands prior to entering the facility. For updated information click here: [spca.bc.ca/news/bc-spca-suspends-intake-of-rabbits-due-to-disease/](https://spca.bc.ca/news/bc-spca-suspends-intake-of-rabbits-due-to-disease/)

We have produced information sheets for rabbit guardians and for shelters, rescues, and sanctuaries working with rabbits. These include biosecurity, sanitation, and risk reduction information as well as resources for what to do if a member of the public finds a dead rabbit.

Learn more here: [spca.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/Rabbit-Hemorrhagic-Disease-Information-Sheet-for-Rabbit-Guardians.pdf](https://spca.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/Rabbit-Hemorrhagic-Disease-Information-Sheet-for-Rabbit-Guardians.pdf)

and [spca.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/BC-SPCA-RHD-Information-Sheet-for-Shelters-Rescues-and-Sanctuaries.pdf](https://spca.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/BC-SPCA-RHD-Information-Sheet-for-Shelters-Rescues-and-Sanctuaries.pdf).

## Asilomar Accords Report

In 2016, the BC SPCA implemented the Asilomar Accords data collection system at all BC SPCA sheltering facilities. This process is part of ongoing efforts to save more companion animals, assure consistent operational practices, use resources to help the greatest possible number of animals, and promote transparency and collaboration.

Every year we report our euthanasia statistics by treatability category. View the 2017 statistics here: [spca.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/BC-SPCA-2017-Asilomar-Annual-Report.pdf](https://spca.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/BC-SPCA-2017-Asilomar-Annual-Report.pdf)

For more about the Asilomar Accords and Adoptability Guidelines, please click here: [spca.bc.ca/programs-services/leaders-in-our-field/professional-resources/for-shelters/](https://spca.bc.ca/programs-services/leaders-in-our-field/professional-resources/for-shelters/) Scroll to the middle of the page for more background information and a link to our full Guidelines, which include detailed information about how we determine whether incoming animals are treatable/ adoptable.



## Rabies control and management evaluation survey

The British Columbia Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) is conducting an evaluation to determine the effectiveness of rabies control and management program since its shift in 2014 from federal to provincial oversight. They want to hear from you to understand BC veterinarians' perceptions and experiences with rabies and get your help to identify opportunities and challenges. Survey completion time is estimated at 10 to 15 minutes. Take the survey at [tinyurl.com/rabies-bccdc](http://tinyurl.com/rabies-bccdc). The deadline to provide your input is April 15th.

### Do you have questions or feedback for the BC SPCA?

Please email us at [outreach@spca.bc.ca](mailto:outreach@spca.bc.ca)



## Update on efforts to ban cat declawing

The BC SPCA is opposed to elective feline onychectomy. The College of Veterinarians of BC can ban this procedure through a bylaw vote.

Still on the fence about whether declawing should be allowed? Consider that studies show significant long-term adverse medical and behavioural complications regardless of surgical procedure used. Find the free full text of a recent JFMS study here:

[journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1098612X17705044?journalCode=jfma](http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1098612X17705044?journalCode=jfma)

Earlier this year, we launched a public campaign to ask the CVBC to ban this procedure. Over 4,500 British Columbians took action and joined us in asking the CVBC for a ban. Learn more here: [spca.bc.ca/news/bc-spca-urges-b-c-veterinarians-to-ban-feline-declawing/](http://spca.bc.ca/news/bc-spca-urges-b-c-veterinarians-to-ban-feline-declawing/)

The CVBC is in a study/consultation period on this matter. Please consider e-mailing them at [feedback@cvbc.ca](mailto:feedback@cvbc.ca) to speak on behalf of cats who need their claws.



## AnimalKind Pest Control

Have you ever had to deal with an infestation of mice in your clinic or a squirrel chewing through wiring in your home? Have clients ever brought orphaned baby animals to you after the mother was trapped and moved away, or asked you what to do about a skunk living under their deck?

When wildlife enters human homes, quick and effective action is a must, but problems can be solved without unnecessary harm to animals. The BC SPCA's new AnimalKind animal welfare accreditation-and-referral program accredits pest control and wildlife management companies committed to using science-based standards that are effective and animal-friendly. Learn more about this new program at: [animalkind.ca](http://animalkind.ca)