

Veterinary update

Dear Colleagues,

With Veterinarian Appreciation Day on April 24th, we firstly wish to thank all of the vets in B.C for the work that you do to care and advocate for animals. **THANK YOU!** Secondly, we want to share with you some of the work the BC SPCA is doing to address the current challenges facing our profession, mainly the shortage of veterinarians. An already identified problem accelerated last year by the pandemic, our own practices are currently booking into August for subsidized surgeries, and many of you have needed to stop taking new clients due to an overwhelming caseload.

Our CEO, Craig Daniell, has been keeping a watchful eye on the impact of the shortage. In a 2020 Vancouver Sun op-ed, he expressed his concerns on the matter; “The reality [is] that the veterinary profession, without whom we could not do our work, is in desperate need of additional support. There is a desperate shortage of veterinarians in the province, [and] coupled with disproportionately high suicide rates and daily work demands, is leading to a crisis that will negatively impact our entire province”. Daniell has been pursuing various avenues to advocate on behalf of veterinarians in B.C. and in a recent press release, he called on government to fund the 20 additional seats approved for B.C residents at WCVM; “We are urging the provincial government to protect B.C. animals by providing funding to access the open spaces”.

We’re also keenly focused on informing both our donor base as well as our employees. In February we hosted a virtual Town Hall for donors. With attendees from across the province, we shared with them the most recent data on the shortage and the impact it’s having on both animals and the people who work in the profession. Most of our donors are guardians to pets themselves, and there were many questions about experiences they’re personally facing because of the shortage. It was a great opportunity to inform pet owners in B.C, as many were not aware of the challenges faced by veterinarians. Internally, we held an in-depth session to cover the private practice side as well as how our work is impacted by the shortage. Our staff appreciated learning more about what veterinarians experience and were quick to ask for solutions to better support vet practices in B.C.

Looking ahead, the BC SPCA will continue to speak out about and explore all avenues that might alleviate the shortage of veterinarians in B.C. We also acknowledge there is a need for more registered technologists in the province, and intend to put attention towards that matter once there is momentum for veterinarians.

We will continue to keep you updated on what the BC SPCA is doing to address the shortage of veterinarians in B.C, and if you have any ideas or suggestions as to what the BC SPCA can do, I would welcome hearing from you via email at hmcicking@spca.bc.ca.



Dr. Hatley McMicking
General Manager,
Veterinary Hospital Services

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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.

Foster kitten care & risk factors for aggressive behaviour as adults

Aggressive behaviour is a common problem behaviour in adult cats, and can be linked to undesirable outcomes such as rehoming or euthanasia. Prevention recommendations often centre around kitten rearing practices, even though there is scant research to support this. In a recent paper, O'Hanley and colleagues from the University of Guelph looked at animal husbandry factors in fostered kittens in relation to the frequency of aggressive behaviours as adults.

Female cats were more likely to have problems with owner-directed aggression than male cats. Living with more than one cat and practicing positive reinforcement training had a protective effect lessening the risk for owner-directed aggression. The use of positive punishment (eg. yelling or water spray bottles) was associated with an increased risk of aggressive behaviour.

The protective effect of rewards-based training and increased risk with punishment-based training fits with a similar trend in the much larger body of research in dog training. This is the reason the BC SPCA's dog trainer accreditation program promotes the use of rewards-based training methods.

Interestingly, these researchers found no significant difference in risk with fostered kittens who were bottle-fed, raised as singletons, or rehomed before 6 weeks of age.

Major findings to incorporate into kitten appointments:

- Encourage kitten owners to bond with their kittens using rewards-based training, and avoid punishment-based methods
- This may be especially important with female kittens because of the increased risk
- Kittens with unconventional rearing (eg. bottle-fed or raised as singletons) may not have increased risk for developing aggressive behaviour as adults.

* O'Hanley, Kristina A., David L. Pearl, and Lee Niel. "Risk factors for aggression in adult cats that were fostered through a shelter program as kittens." *Applied Animal Behaviour Science* 236 (2021): 105251.

Analysis of owner surrender reasons could help keep families together



During her time as a Master student in the UBC Animal Welfare Program, Bailey Eagan reviewed a decade of shelter intake data from 36 BC SPCA shelters across the province with the aim of better understanding why guardians surrender their pets. Close to 19,000 dogs and 29,000 cats over one year of age were surrendered during this time period, representing roughly 30-35% of total intake of these animals, respectively.

From this review, it became apparent that surrender reasons fall into two broad categories: those stemming from the guardians' life circumstances and those concerning the animals themselves. Perhaps surprisingly, most cats and dogs – about 85% – are surrendered because of issues related to their guardians, and not because they have health or behaviour problems. Eagan also found that:

- Housing issues are the primary reason that cats and dogs end up in shelters, with approximately one-quarter of all animals surrendered due to the challenges of finding pet-friendly housing.
- Very few unwanted animals come in as the result of being given as a gift. This supports a growing body of literature that shows gifted pets are just as likely to remain in their homes as pets acquired in other ways.
- When cats and dogs are surrendered for financial reasons, the most common issue reported is the cost of veterinary care.

Importantly, this research identifies touchpoints for intervention to help prevent animals from entering shelters in the first place. For housing issues, for instance, this could be as simple as providing a pet deposit.



Update on Fechavirus and Astrovirus

Last summer, we shared research updates from our shelter medicine program including the discovery of a novel feline virus, fechavirus (feline chaphamaparvovirus [FeCHPV]), from an outbreak investigated by our Animal Health team. Because the discovery occurred long after the outbreak was resolved, no control samples were available and it was impossible to conclude whether fechavirus could be a causative agent of feline enteric disease.

New research from a team in Italy sheds additional light on this virus, finding that fechavirus was the most commonly identified enteric virus in cats with acute gastroenteritis in a case-control study. In this study, 36.8% (14/38) of cats with acute gastroenteritis were shedding fechavirus (by PCR) vs. 2% (1/51) of control cats, a statistically significant difference. These researchers also screened archival respiratory tract samples from cats with and without Upper Respiratory Tract Disease (URTD) and found small numbers of cats shedding fechavirus DNA in both groups with no statistical difference between groups. They concluded “this finding confirms previous observations on the possible etiologic role of FeChPV as an enteric pathogen of cats.”

Working with the same collaborators at the University of California, San Francisco, our Animal Health team investigated another small outbreak of feline vomiting that occurred in Vancouver last winter. Once again, commercial diagnostics did not yield a causative agent. While all samples tested negative for fechavirus, we found extensive feline astrovirus shedding (a virus discovered several decades ago, but about which little is known). This outbreak included both control and serially collected samples; ultimately we found that 10/11 sick cats and 5/9 healthy cats housed in the same areas were shedding feline astrovirus for up to 19 days. When archival (2018) and current (fall 2020) samples were screened, no feline astrovirus was found.

These small studies indicate that while fechavirus and feline astrovirus can be shed by asymptomatic cats, neither is a widespread “normal” resident of the feline virome and there is growing evidence that they may cause clinical disease. Both are small, durable, non-enveloped viruses. Clinicians in BC should consider viral causes of acute gastroenteritis in cats, and should design hospital infection control measures to prevent transmission of non-enveloped viruses (which are not killed by many common disinfectants).

Webinar opportunity

Interested in a free, RACE-approved one-hour CE webinar to learn more about fechavirus and outbreak management lessons learned from the outbreak? Please email Mandi Idle, RVT at midle@spca.bc.ca and we will notify you when a session is scheduled.

Dr. Morgan award adapts to virtual conferences

With in-person conferences being cancelled as of March 2020, the annual Dr. Carol Morgan Memorial Award (CMMA) initially awarded to attend the national animal welfare conference that month was paused as the world transitioned to virtual gatherings.

Ontario shelter veterinarian Dr. Laurie Gaines was the 2020 CMMA recipient and she pivoted to use the grant to virtually attend Humane Canada's National Animal Welfare Conference in April 2021. Dr. Gaines says she is excited to "use the knowledge obtained in sessions at the conference to train animal shelter staff, improve the lives of shelter animals, and create community outreach programs focused on keeping families and pets together."

The 2021 CMMA will also be used to support online learning and has been awarded to P.E.I. veterinarian Dr. Laurie McDuffee. Dr. McDuffee will use the grant toward completing a course in the human-animal bond, offered in partnership by the North American Veterinary Community Learning Academy and the Human Animal Bond Research Institute.

The legacy of former BC SPCA board member, Dr. Carol Morgan continues to be exemplified in the work of these outstanding veterinarians working to increase the knowledge of the veterinary community in areas of animal welfare and ethics.

Yard dogs: transitioning dogs with a history of outdoor living to house pets

A common challenge for animal shelters is helping dogs with a history of living exclusively outdoors adjust to life as a house pet. Dogs with a history of living outdoors in a yard, on a farm, or as a stray can become lovely well-adjusted house pets, but the transition can often be challenging to both the adopter and the dog.

Here are some of the common challenges and some strategies for overcoming them:

Outdoor access can remain very important to dogs accustomed to living exclusively outdoors, even if they are now permitted to take naps on the living room couch. Finding these dogs a home with a safe outdoor space and permitting them to spend as much time outside as they like can be very important for some dogs. Installing a dog door so dogs can make their own choices about whether to be inside or outside can also be helpful.

Fear of household noises or activities can be a common challenge, especially if the dog is under-socialized as well as unaccustomed to living indoors. Outdoor dogs are not used to sounds such as the microwave beeping or the garbage truck going by. Dogs tend to habituate to these noises over time but it can take weeks to months. If just one or two noises are triggering, systematic desensitization and counter-conditioning training can be the fastest way to overcome noise phobias. If a large number of noises or indoor experiences are triggering for the dog, anxiety-reducing medications can be beneficial. After a few months when the dog is well adjusted to the home environment, the dog can be weaned off medications.

Dogs with a history of living outdoors may also feel uncomfortable in tight spaces such as hallways. In general, when dogs feel afraid interacting with people their first choice is to move away (flight). However, indoor spaces can create artificially tight environments in which some dogs feel their only choice is to fight, or scare people or animals they perceive as threatening away with aggressive behaviour. It can be helpful to use barriers to prevent dogs from entering tight spaces of the home. Cornering a dog and forcing physical contact is a common trigger for aggressive behaviour in dogs. Initially, interactions with a newly adopted dog should be done in larger spaces without restraint, so the dog knows they can simply back away if they feel uncomfortable.

2020 Asilomar Accords reporting

In 2016, the BC SPCA implemented the Asilomar Accords data collection system in all sheltering branches. This process is part of ongoing efforts to save more companion animals, assure consistent operational practices, utilize resources to help the greatest number of animals possible, and promote transparency and collaboration. The policy, which includes determining treatability for all medical and behavioural conditions, is available to the public here: https://spca.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/Asilomar_Accords_and_Adoptability_Guidelines_Policy_V_2016-08-04.pdf

One of the purposes of reporting this data is transparency regarding the number of animals euthanized for treatable conditions. We continue to work to reduce this number. In 2020, of 13,982 animal outcomes, we euthanized 1,352 animals (about 9% of total outcomes; Live Release Rate of 91%). Of these, 18% fell into Treatable categories, and 81% were considered Untreatable (the categories were determined by a public opinion poll of what is generally considered treatable in BC communities and not by the BC SPCA). There were no Healthy companion animals euthanized. This report can be found here: <https://spca.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/BC-SPCA-2020-Asilomar-Annual-Report.pdf>