A study of animal hoarding in NSW

Clinical Professor John Snowdon, Concord Hospital
Dr Graeme Halliday, Concord Hospital
Mr David OShannessy, RSPCA NSW Chief Inspector
Mr Steve Coleman, RSPCA NSW Chief Executive Officer
Dr Rosemary Elliott, Project Consultant
What is animal hoarding?

- Patronek (1999): “the accumulation of a large number of animals and failure to provide minimal standards of nutrition, sanitation and veterinary care. Further, the owner fails to act on the deteriorating condition of the animals and environment.”
What is animal hoarding?


1. Having more than the typical number of companion animals
2. Failing to provide even minimal standards of nutrition, sanitation, shelter and veterinary care, with this neglect often resulting in illness and death from starvation, spread of infectious disease and untreated injury or medical conditions
3. Denial of the inability to provide this minimum care and the impact of that failure on the animals, the household and human occupants of the dwelling
4. Persistence, despite the failure, in accumulating and controlling animals.
What is animal hoarding?

- ‘Animal hoarding’ describes the behaviour of persons who accumulate and persistently retain more animals than they have the capacity or will to look after appropriately, and who do not fulfil an acceptable duty of care towards those animals.
Why animal hoarding is a problem

• Detrimental impact on animal welfare
• Exacerbation of companion animal overpopulation
• Human suffering
• Burden on animal and human services
• High level of recidivism
• Public health implications
• Impact on community
What do we know about animal hoarding?

- Patronek (1999) – in a sample of 54 cases:
  - 46% were aged 60 or more
  - 76% were women
  - 72% single/divorced/widowed
  - 56% lived alone
  - Median number of animals 39 per case
  - Cats in 65% of cases, dogs in 60%
  - Animals acquired primarily through unplanned breeding
  - 78% of dwellings heavily cluttered and unsanitary
What do we know about animal hoarding?

- HARC (2004) – in a sample of 71 cases:
  - Number of animals ranged from 10 to 918
  - 83% of owners were female
  - Median age was 55
  - 93% of dwellings rated as very unsanitary
  - Objects were hoarded in all houses
  - Access to facilities was very restricted in 50 to 75% of cases
Animal hoarding in Australia

- Ockenden and Marston (2014): 22 reported cases from RSPCA Victoria and 31 councils:
  - Average hoarder middle aged to elderly female (63% female)
  - 36% unemployed (higher than Victorian average)
  - Mental condition diagnosed in 6 cases (27%)
  - 45% also hoarded objects
  - 68% of cases had very unhygienic homes
  - Number of animals ranged from 10 to 180
  - Most common source was uncontrolled breeding (82%)
  - Cats most commonly hoarded
Animal hoarding in Australia

- Joffe, OShannessy, Dhand and Fawcett (2014), 29 convicted cases:
  - Mostly female, aged 40-64
  - 33% identified as breeders
  - Dogs hoarded in 80% of cases
  - Total number of animals ranged from 6 to 500
  - Animal living areas unsanitary in all cases
  - Human living areas unsanitary in 33% of cases
  - 5 cases (17%) dismissed under the Mental Health Act and ordered to have mental health care
Why do people hoard animals?

- **Exploiters:**
  - Actively acquire/breed for their own gratification (financial/control)
  - Fail to look after them properly, act cruelly, sociopathic collecting
  - Happy to dispose of animals if given sufficient incentive

- **Overwhelmed:**
  - By excessive animal reproduction or some change in their lives
  - Accumulate animals passively
  - Some recognition of their inability to cope; the most likely to relinquish animals or accept help

- **Rescuers:**
  - Highly resistant to surrendering their animals
  - Actively collect from any source possible on a mission to ‘save’ them all; may be involved in rescue organisations
Is this a mental health problem?

- Depression
- Personality disorders
- Brain changes (frontal lobe) due to:
  - Dementia
  - Schizophrenia
  - Alcoholism
- Attachment disorders due to chaotic, neglectful or abusive childhoods
Aims of our study

- Describe the range and characteristics of ‘animal hoarding’ cases referred to RSPCA NSW
- Examine factors relevant to the development of animal hoarding, particularly mental health problems
- Pilot study for a more detailed and ambitious study investigating the prevalence of mental disorder, psychological disorder or cognitive impairment in animal hoarders
Methodology

- Descriptive retrospective study, using de-identified data sheets
- Standardised ratings:
  - Environmental Cleanliness and Clutter Scale (ECCS, Halliday and Snowdon, 2009)
  - Tufts Animal Care and Condition (TACC) Environmental Health Scale (Patronek, 1997)
- Cases identified by Chief Inspector
- Role of Administrative Assistant
- Data were entered from 2013 until December 31st 2015
Variables examined

- POI:
  - Demographic (sex, employment, age, income benefits, marital status, living arrangements)
  - Category of animal hoarder
  - Contributing factors (mental health, physical disability, drugs/alcohol)
  - Animals bred or traded as source of income
  - Association of POI with animal rescue networks or human welfare agencies

- Dwelling/animal housing details
- Animal details (source, species, number)
Results: POI

- Sample of 49 referred cases (51 POI)
- 78% female
- 57% over 50 years old
- 41% single and 35% live alone
- 45% unemployed
- 35% on income benefits:
  - 20% of sample on Disability Pension
  - 12% of sample on unemployment benefits
Results: POI

Category of hoarder

- Breeder: 29.4%
- Overwhelmed: 23.5%
- Rescuer: 21.6%
- Incipient: 15.7%
- Exploiter: 9.8%
Results: POI

- Contributing factors to animal hoarding:
  - Mental health 51%
  - Drugs/alcohol 12%
  - Physical disability 10%

- Human agencies involved with POI in 55% of cases:
  - Council 29%
  - Mental health 18%
  - Police 16%
  - SW 10%
  - Housing Dept 10%
  - FACS 8%
Results: Dwelling

- Type of dwelling: 59% house, 29% rural, 12% unit
- Inspector saw inside 71% of dwellings
- Moderate to severe squalor in 45% of dwellings (ECCS > 12)
- ECCS median 15 (range 2 to 30) indicates severe domestic squalor
- Clutter/at least moderately impaired accessibility in 39%
- At least moderate accumulation of refuse or garbage in 49%
- Hoarding (at least moderately excessive accumulation of items of little value) in 51%
- POI acknowledges animal hoarding/squalor problem 38%
Results: Animal details

- Animals acquired by:
  - Unplanned breeding: 58%
  - Collecting strays: 38%
  - General public: 30%
  - Planned breeding: 26%
  - Rescue networks: 18%

- Species hoarded by POI: cats (73%), dogs (53%)

- Mean number of animals per POI:
  - 57.7 total (range 1 to 300, median 40)
  - 35.6 cats (range 1-150),
  - 39.2 dogs (range 1-300)
## Results: Animal Housing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Animal housing</th>
<th>Percentage of animals</th>
<th>Living conditions very unsanitary or filthy for animals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>House</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cage</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kennels</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aviaries</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shed</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yard</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pens</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garage</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Comparison to previous studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Patronek 1999</th>
<th>HARC 2004</th>
<th>Our study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sample size</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POI age</td>
<td>46% ≥60</td>
<td>Median 55</td>
<td>47% ≥60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POI sex</td>
<td>76% female</td>
<td>83% female</td>
<td>78% female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POI single status</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POI lives alone</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animals per case</td>
<td>Median of 39</td>
<td>Range 10-918</td>
<td>Median of 40 (range 1-300)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Species hoarded</td>
<td>Cats 65%, dogs 60%</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Cats 73%, dogs 53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dwelling heavily cluttered</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>39% of total households (22% not rated)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dwelling very unsanitary</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>49% of total (24% not rated)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objects hoarded</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>51% of total (20% not rated)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Significant associations

- Mental health problems and degree of squalor (ANOVA .011)
- Severity of animal hoarding (number of animals) and accumulation of refuse or garbage (ANOVA .020)
- NS trend for greater severity of animal hoarding (number of animals) by category of hoarder:
  - exploiter/breeder mean of 80 animals
  - rescuer/overwhelmed mean of 51 animals
Significance of study

- Largest research sample of animal hoarding in Australia
- Total vs selected sample
- Use of standardised measures to demonstrate:
  - severe domestic squalor in human dwellings
  - unsanitary conditions in animals’ environment
- Examines potential role of mental health problems
- Identified high rates of unemployment, Disability Support Pension, and mental health problems with little involvement of services
- Confirms association between severe squalor and both mental health problems and animal hoarding
- Assesses categories of animal hoarding (implications for interventions)
- Identifies roles of both planned and unplanned breeding
- Identifies greater vulnerability of cats compared to dogs
Plan for larger research study

- Large well-funded study on all referred cases in NSW
- Conduct clinical assessments of owners
- Estimate prevalence of mental health and psychological disorders
- Describe the range of these disorders
- Establish a protocol for involvement of mental health services
- Suggestions for an inter-agency model of care
- Develop guidelines for assessment and management of animal hoarding
Questions for discussion

- What are the barriers to owners being assessed and treated for mental health problems?
- How could we address these barriers?
- How could services collaborate to provide a clinical service to owners?
- How do we best protect animals from exploiters/breeders whose presentation is more consistent with criminality or sociopathy?
- Other questions?