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?

- Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium (HARC) (2011):

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
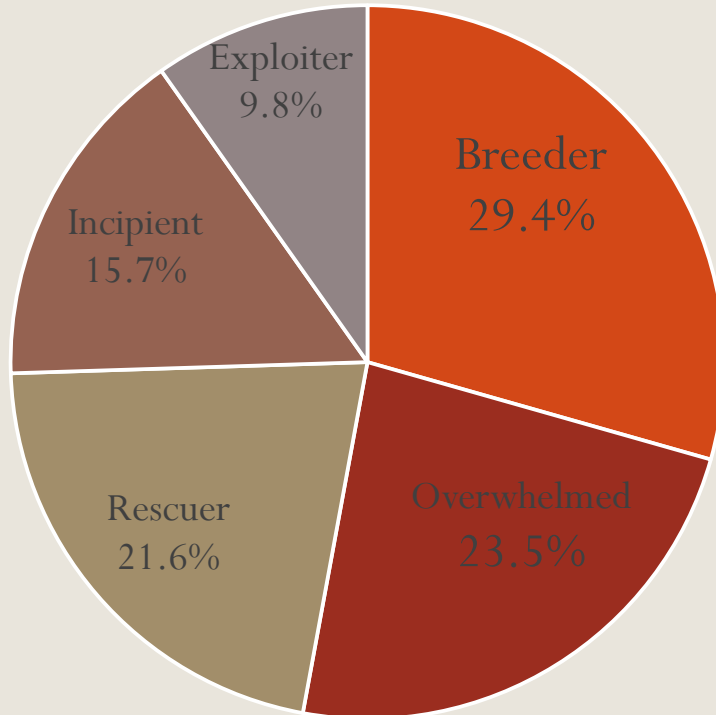
Variables examined

- 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

- 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 median15 (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

Animal housing	Percentage of animals	Living conditions very unsanitary or filthy for animals
House	69%	65%
Cage	38%	72%
Kennels	16%	13%
Aviaries	10%	80%
Shed	14%	29%
Yard	55%	38%
Pens	16%	25%
Garage	16%	50%
Other	37%	59%

Comparison to previous studies

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

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?