

Rethinking Spay and Neuter
By Geneva Coats, R.N.
Secretary, California Federation of Dog Clubs

Pet sterilization has become widely regarded as a routine procedure that is purely beneficial. Most breeders today sell companion puppies under contracts requiring spay or neuter as a condition of sale.⁶ Ingrained in recent popular culture is the notion that pet overpopulation is a serious concern, and that to prevent the deaths of animals in shelters all pets should be sterilized. To bolster the campaign for pet sterilization, we have further been informed that a sterilized pet is happier, healthier and longer-lived than one who remains intact.

Should we believe these widely circulated ideas that "everybody knows?" What are the facts?

"OVERPOPULATION"

In the mid-twentieth century, there was an abundance of pets; many were available "free to good home" via newspaper ads. Few pets were sterilized, and many people unwisely allowed their dogs to roam the neighborhood. Consequently, there were many unplanned litters produced by family pets.

According to "Maddie's Fund" president Richard Avanzino, in the 1970s, our country's animal control agencies were killing, on average, about 115 dogs and cats annually for every 1000 human residents. This amounted to about 24 million shelter deaths every year.² Avanzino is also the former executive director of the San Francisco SPCA, and is regarded by many as the founder of the modern no-kill movement in the US.

To deal with "The Problem" of massive shelter killings, a huge public awareness campaign was initiated. "The Problem" of too many pets and not enough homes to go around was ingrained into the public psyche. The importance of spaying and neutering pets was emphasized. Vets began to routinely urge their clients to sterilize their pets as an integral part of being a "responsible owner". Planned breeding became a politically incorrect activity. A popular slogan that persists today is "Don't breed or buy, while shelter dogs die."

The crusade for spaying and neutering pets has been very successful. A 2009-2010 national pet owners' survey by the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association reveals that the vast majority of owned pets...75% of dogs and 87% of cats... are spayed or neutered. *(As reported by the HSUS in Dec. 2009):*
<http://www.humanesociety.org/issues/pet_overpopulation/facts/pet_ownership_statistics.html>

In recent years, according to Avanzino, annual shelter death numbers have dramatically declined to about 12 per thousand human residents, or about 3.6 million deaths each year. This amounts to a staggering 85% reduction in killing since the 1970s.² We have reached a nationwide pet shelter death rate that averages just 1.2% per population. This can effectively be considered a "no kill" rate.

In most areas, feral cats and kittens account for the majority of shelter numbers.⁹ Several areas of the country have actual shortages of adoptable dogs, particularly

purebreds and puppies, and must import from other regions to fill the need. Dogs are being smuggled into the US by the thousands. Some rescue groups are even importing from other countries....Mexico, Brazil, the Caribbean, Taiwan and Romania, to name some of the most popular points of origin. The conservative estimate is that 300,000 dogs are imported into the US each year to meet the demand for pets.³

According to shelter expert Nathan Winograd, every year in this country, approximately 3 million adoptable pets die in shelters.* At the same time, each year around 17 million US households are looking for a new pet. There are nearly six times as many homes opening up every year as the number of adoptable pets killed in shelters!⁸ It seems the greatest challenge these days is to find ways to match up the adoptable pets with the homes that are waiting for them. Breed rescues fill this niche admirably, but are privately funded and desperately in need of assistance in order to be able to effectively perform this service. Perhaps some of the public funds budgeted for shelters to kill animals could be better spent helping rescue groups who are proactive in matching adoptable pets to suitable homes.

SPAY/NEUTER AND HEALTH

Now that we have addressed the issue of pet overpopulation, let's examine the claim that sterilization surgery promotes better health. While there are some benefits to sterilization, there are some drawbacks as well.

Sterilization will naturally serve to prevent any unwanted litters. In bitches, spaying will greatly reduce the risk of breast cancer, pyometra, perianal fistula and cancers of the reproductive organs.⁵

Spay surgery itself carries a somewhat high rate (around 20%) of complications such as infection, hemorrhage and even death.⁵ Spaying significantly increases the rate of urinary incontinence in bitches....about 20-30% of all spayed bitches will eventually develop this problem. This is believed to be most likely caused by the lack of estrogen that results from being spayed.¹

Sterilization of males may reduce some unwanted sexual behaviors, but there are few other proven benefits to neutering a male dog. Testicular cancer is prevented, but the actual risk of that cancer is extremely low (<1%) among intact dogs. Contrary to popular belief, studies show that the risk of prostate cancer is actually HIGHER in neutered dogs than in their intact counterparts.⁵

Other studies prove significant health risks associated with sterilization, particularly when done at an early age. The most problematic is a delayed closure of the bony growth plates. This results in an abnormal, "weedy" skeletal development that increases the incidence of orthopedic problems like hip dysplasia and patellar luxation. Working and performance dogs, if neutered before maturity, risk the inability to perform the jobs they were bred for.¹⁰

But by far the most startling news to surface this year is the result of a study that shows that keeping ovaries to the age of six years or later is associated with a greater than 30% increase of lifespan in female Rottweilers.⁴ Similar studies in humans reinforce this finding.⁷ A 30% longer lifespan means that you could have many additional years with your bitch simple by delaying spay surgery until middle-age or later.

Behavioral studies show that sterilization increases fearfulness, noise phobias and aggression. Other well-documented adverse health effects of de-sexing include increased risk of bone cancer, hemangiosarcoma, hypothyroidism, and cognitive dysfunction in older pets. Sterilization confers an increased susceptibility to infectious disease, and also a higher incidence of adverse reactions to vaccines.¹⁰

So there is no need to feel obligated to sterilize for health or welfare reasons. But, what about the need to protect the puppies that we sell from unethical breeders?

SALES CONTRACTS

Many breeders are justifiably very concerned about the possibility of their dogs falling into disreputable hands. Some are afraid that their dogs may end up in a commercial breeding establishment where they may not receive optimal care and attention. Another issue is the possibility of pet owners who may wish to breed solely for some quick cash.

To help prevent such situations, it has become commonplace for breeders to include spay/neuter requirements in their pet sales contract, and/or to sell the dog on a limited registration. Another common stipulation, particularly for a show/breeding dog, is requiring that the dog be returned to the seller in the event the buyer no longer wishes to keep him.⁶

Such contracts are highly effective when selling a puppy to someone who is honest and ethical. However, contracts are easily skirted by the unscrupulous, particularly if the buyer lives in a different region. Someone intent on breeding may do so regardless of contract language, and sell the puppies without any registration. And without personal knowledge of the living conditions at your puppy's new home, it is impossible to predict what sort of care and attention he or she will receive. Even some show breeders may have very different ideas than the seller of what constitutes proper care. There is no substitute for a home check to follow up that initial puppy application!

Bottom line, the best insurance for a happy future for your puppies is making sure that you get to know the buyer personally. If something about the buyer or his attitude doesn't seem right, then it's probably best to cancel the sale. If you wish to sell puppies on spay-neuter agreements you might also consider advising the buyer to wait until the puppy reaches maturity before having the spay or neuter surgery performed.

PUREBRED GENE POOLS

Sterilization of all dogs sold as companions may have some unintended adverse effects. The nature of purebred breeding for the show ring involves intense selection that severely narrows the gene pool in many, if not most, breeds. Some breeds started with just a small pool of founders. Through the years, overuse of only a few popular sires further reduced the genetic variety available in the breed. When troublesome health problems surface and become widespread, where can we turn for "new blood"?

The show-bred population of a breed may have become too small as a result of intense inbreeding or the genetic bottleneck created by overuse of popular sires; or the breed gene pool may have become genetically depleted because of unwise

selection for specific, sometimes unhealthy physical traits favored in the show ring. As a result, dogs from the "pet" population may actually be the salvation of the breed gene pool.

Trying to guess which dogs are the "best" to keep intact for showing and breeding can be hit-or-miss. Imagine the scenario where a successful show dog eventually develops a heritable health issue, while his brother is much healthier...but brother was neutered long ago, thereby eliminating those good genes forever. What about that Champion's non-show quality sister, who just happens to have good health, great mothering instincts and/or the ability produce exceptional offspring? If sold as a spayed companion, her genes are effectively lost.

And what about the very future of the dog fancy? Many people (myself included) have bought an intact dog as a pet, and only later sparked an interest in showing and breeding. Developing new breeders is critical to the survival of our sport, but if we sell all companions on spay/neuter agreements, we will lose many fanciers before they have the chance to discover the joy of dog breeding and showing! Sadly, mandatory sterilization laws are sweeping the nation and may further compromise the future of the dog fancy. AKC registrations continue to decline and the push to legally and/or contractually require spay and neuter of most every dog will only worsen that situation.

Regardless, there is a huge demand in society for healthy pets; a demand which the responsible breeders could not come close to meeting even if they wanted to...and sometimes, they do not want to. The choice we have as a society is how that demand will be filled. Many believe that only responsible people should be allowed to keep intact dogs and breed on a limited basis. However, the attempt to legally force well-regulated and inspected commercial breeders and the casual small home breeders out of the picture leaves only the unregulated, less visible "underground" producers and smugglers to fill the need for pets. Perhaps it is time to re-think our preconceived notions about who should and shouldn't possess intact dogs!

As a dog owner, one must weigh the risks of sterilization against the benefits in order to make that very personal decision. Popular culture and many veterinarians downplay or even ignore the risks involved with spay/neuter because of their own belief in the need to reduce dog breeding in general. Many people still believe that overpopulation remains a pressing concern and that sterilization always promotes better health. Some even believe that breeding a female is abusive. It seems the animal rights groups have done an excellent job of brainwashing the public on these matters!

As breeders, we may be wise to re-examine the routine request to have all our companion puppies spayed or neutered. The future availability of pets, the perpetuation of the dog fancy, the health of the individual dogs and the gene pools of the breeds that we love may all depend on keeping a few more dogs intact!

*An adoptable pet is one that does not have insurmountable health or temperament issues. Per California's Hayden law:

The California Legislature Defines No-Kill Terms ■

California Law, SB 1785 Statutes of 1998, also known as "The Hayden Law" has defined no-kill terms.

What is Adoptable? [1834.4. \(a\)](#)

"No adoptable animal should be euthanized if it can be adopted into a suitable home. Adoptable animals include only those animals eight weeks of age or older that, at or subsequent to the time the animal is impounded or otherwise taken into possession, have manifested no sign of a behavioral or temperamental defect that could pose a health or safety risk or otherwise make the animal unsuitable for placement as a pet, and have manifested no sign of disease, injury, or congenital or hereditary condition that adversely affects the health of the animal or that is likely to adversely affect the animal's health in the future."

Adoptable dogs may be old, deaf, blind, disfigured or disabled.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

¹Bovsun, Mara;

"Puddle Jumping; Canine Urinary Incontinence";
AKC Gazette April 2009

<http://www.barkingbulletin.com/newsletter/2009/q4/Puddle-Jumping--Canine-Urinary-Incontinence/>

²Fry, Mike,

"Reflections from the No Kill Conference in Washington DC":

<http://www.animalarkshelter.org/animal/ArkArticles.nsf/AllArticles/3A078C33CD079D17862575AD00471A9B>

³James, Susan Donaldson (ABC News)

"300,000 Imported Puppies Prompt Rabies Concerns"
October 24, 2007

<http://www.petpac.net/news/headlines/importedpuppies/>

⁴Nolen, R. Scott

"Rottweiler Study Links Ovaries With Exceptional Longevity"
JAVMA March 2010

<http://www.avma.org/onlnews/javma/mar10/100301g.asp>

⁵Sanborn, Laura J., MS

"Long-Term Health Risks and Benefits Associated with Spay/Neuter in Dogs"; May 14, 2007

<http://www.naiaonline.org/pdfs/longtermhealtheffectsofspayneuterindogs.pdf>

⁶Thoms, Joy

"The Importance of Spay-Neuter Contracts"

The Orient Express, Nov, 2009

⁷Waters, David J., DVM, PhD, Diplomate ACVS

"A Healthier Respect for Ovaries"

<http://www.gpmcf.org/respectovaries.html>

⁸ Winograd, Nathan J.

"Debunking Pet Overpopulation"

June 29, 2009

<http://www.nathanwinograd.com/?p=1390>

⁹ Winograd, Nathan, "Redemption: The Myth of Pet Overpopulation and the No Kill Revolution in America" Almaden Books, 2nd edition, Feb 25, 2009.

¹⁰ Zink, Christine, DVM, PhD, DACVP

"Early Spay-Neuter Considerations for the Canine Athlete"; 2005

<http://caninesports.com/SpayNeuter.html>