

Veterinarians and animal hoarders

Excerpted from an article in the *Keystone Veterinarian*, Sept/October 2001 issue by Anne Irwin, Executive Director, Bucks County SPCA, and President, Federated Humane Societies of Pennsylvania

People do not get into these situations overnight. Veterinarians may have animal hoarders or people who are on the way to becoming hoarders among their clients or even among their own staff. These situations are complex, but veterinarian can be a positive influence or they can unwittingly help these people to continue in a pattern that is detrimental to animals and to themselves. Dr. Gary Patronek from Tufts University suggests these warning signs:

- constantly changing parade of pets, most seen once and not again
- visits for problems not usually seen in good preventive health care like trauma or infectious disease
- rarely see the same animal for diseases of old age like cancer or heart disease
- may travel great distances to the practice, come at odd hours and use multiple vets so as not to tip them off about the number of animals
- may seek heroic and futile care for animals they have recently found

Some other signs that I have noticed from first hand experience with hoarders include:

- perfuming or bathing animals prior to a visit to conceal odor
- bringing in a relatively presentable animal in an attempt to get medication for more seriously ill animals at home, and trying to persuade the vet to provide medication or refills without seeing the animals
- being unwilling or unable to say how many animals they have
- claiming to have just found or rescued an animal in obviously deplorable condition, although condition of the animal including strong odor of urine, overgrown nails and muscle atrophy may be more indicative of confinement in filthy conditions than of wandering the streets
- an interest in rescuing even more animals, including checking the office bulletin board and questioning other clients in the waiting room

Veterinarians may unwittingly enable people with the tendency to become animal hoarders if they continually call the same person or refer clients to the same person who might be willing to give a home to one more old dog, or one more cat. Animal hoarders have a hard time saying no to another animal even if they are already stretched beyond their limits. The temptation to find room for more animals at home, either as permanent residents or in foster care, is an occupational hazard for people who work in veterinary offices and in animal shelters. It is important in orientation for these jobs and in continual messages of support to remind staff that they cannot save every animal by taking it into their own homes. Sending home too many free samples or donated supplies without knowing the situation may also make it easier for people to take on more animals than

they can handle. Another twist to be aware of is that hoarders may seek employment or volunteer opportunities with veterinary clinics, perhaps on a part-time basis, to have access to free or discounted medications or supplies.

Animal hoarders become increasingly isolated from friends, family and members of the community. It is a full time job for them just maintaining minimal standards for a large number of animals, and a constant source of fear keeping their deteriorating way of life hidden. A veterinarian may be a lifeline for them. Gentle questioning by the vet that allows them to save face may reveal useful facts about the animal's care and living conditions. Clients with a few beloved pets may want and need a whole variety of options when one of their animals is seriously ill. Animal hoarders are stretched beyond their limits, but they often do not want to give up on an animal in serious condition even when they have a hard time keeping up with basic care and sanitation. While acknowledging their concern for animals, the veterinarian needs to be firm and clear about necessary care especially if euthanasia is indicated. These people can be frustrating as clients, but a vet who is willing to stick with them and try to understand more about the problem can make a real difference for the person, for individual animals and sometimes even for a whole situation.