Swedish cat shelters: a descriptive survey of husbandry practices, routines and management

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Abstract

Animal shelters rescue and care for society’s unwanted companion animals. Nonetheless, several studies have shown that ending up in a shelter can be stressful, and that shelter husbandry can amplify and spread certain diseases. The aim of the present study was to investigate and describe husbandry policy, practices and routines as well as occurrence and prevention of diseases in Swedish cat shelters. A survey was sent to 64 potential shelters of which 39 (61%) responded. Thirty-two shelters (82%) housed cats (Felis silvestris catus) in groups; one shelter provided only solitary housing. Thirty-one shelters provided single, pair and group housing. The most common group size was 3–5 cats (59%). Ninety-two percent of responding shelters had routines and/or protocol(s) for the management of the cats, 35 had healthcare routines and 30 shelters had routines for the admission of cats. All shelters with the exception of one had quarantine, and 22 shelters (58%) vaccinated cats prior to admittance. There was a significant positive correlation between shelter size and number of reported diseases. The most common reported disease was cat ‘flu/cold, although altogether, shelters reported a low occurrence of disease. Practices differ between shelters relating to management, eg use of quarantine and vaccination routines. In Sweden, group housing is common and shelters provide cats with plenty of resources, eg hides and climbing structures, often providing outdoor access and a more ‘home-like’ environment. The possibility that providing a more ‘enriched home-like’ environment can help cats cope with the shelter environment is discussed, thereby decreasing the occurrence and transmission of infectious diseases.

Keywords: animal welfare, disease, domestic cat, husbandry, routines, shelter

Introduction

In the most recent survey of Swedish pet ownership (SCB 2012) the domestic cat (Felis silvestris catus) population showed a slight decrease from 1.3 to 1.2 million between 2006 and 2012 (SCB 2006, 2012). In contrast, elsewhere, the cat is gaining in popularity as a pet in many parts of the world (Lyons & Kurushima 2012). Unfortunately, in conjunction with this rise, increasing numbers of cats (Scarlett et al 2002; Dantas-Divers et al 2011) end up euthanised, abandoned on the streets or given up to shelters. There are indications that the number of cats ending up in shelters is on the increase (Patronek et al 1996; Eriksson et al 2009). Of those cats ending up in shelters, euthanasia rate is approximated to be 10% in Sweden (Eriksson et al 2009), 47% in Australia (RSPCA) and 40–50% in the US and Canada (Turner et al 2012). One hypothesis to explain this difference could be that shelters in Australia, US and Canada have the expectation of a greater turnover of cats (eg adoption rate) since they are often part of larger animal welfare organisations or funded by the government. In Sweden, cat shelters are privately run, often do not belong to any organisation and receive no funding from the government, ie other than Swedish legislation no external regulation of shelter practices exists. Kass (2007) estimated that 3.3 million cats are euthanised yearly in US shelters. However, initiatives are in place, eg collaborations between animal welfare groups and animal shelters and the provision of better tools for co-operation within communities, to try to increase the ‘live rate release’ from shelters (Weiss et al 2013).

The aim of an animal shelter is to rescue and care for companion animals no longer wanted by society. Despite these aims, previous research has shown that ending up in a shelter can be stressful for a cat (eg Kessler & Turner 1997; Ottway & Hawkins 2003; Pedersen et al 2004; Dinnage et al 2009; Tanaka et al 2012; Möstl et al 2013) as cats are sensitive to novel environments (Griffin & Hume 2006; Stella et al 2013) and many unfamiliar situations can induce a stress response (Griffin & Hume 2006). Potential stressors in connection with relinquishment start with being surrendered by the owner (Dybdall et al 2007), entering a new environment (Dybdall et al 2007; Goeding et al 2012), living under crowded conditions (Möstl et al 2013) and/or in groups with unknown individuals (Ottway & Hawkins 2003) with a high turnover of cats (Tanaka et al 2012), and inconsistent handling and routines (Carlstead et al 1993).