

The Provisions of Care Received by Rabbits Adopted from an Animal Welfare Centre.

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Abstract

In New Zealand, very little is known about how rabbits are kept although it is assumed that most are housed in the traditional “back garden hutch”. Whilst major welfare organisations may provide information on appropriate rabbit care, whether or not people follow that advice, is unknown.

This study aimed to:

- Establish baseline information as to how companion rabbits are housed and cared for in New Zealand
- Identify the reasons why people choose to keep rabbits
- Quantify common perceptions about rabbits as pets
- Discover whether the care received by rabbits is consistent with recommendations made by welfare organisations

Seventy-nine people, who had adopted a rabbit from a welfare centre in the last eighteen months, were surveyed. Participants who had owned their rabbit for less than one month were excluded from the survey. In the case of participants with multiple rabbits both rabbits were included in the survey.

Most participants provided their rabbit with a high level of care that exceeded recommendations made by welfare organisations such as the Auckland SPCA and the Rabbit Welfare Fund and the results were generally similar to those of Mullan and Main (2006). The majority of rabbits were adopted as pets for children and most participants thought that rabbits made good pets for children. Rabbits were considered low maintenance pets by many although, for those owning other companion animals (cats and dogs) they were often considered to require the same, or more, care.

Areas where the rabbits care was lacking were: the frequency and quantity of hay provided, frequency of vaccinations, outdoor access (20% of respondents allowed outdoor access once per week or less) and provision of a companion rabbit. These have previously been identified as having negative implications for rabbit welfare.

Most people (60%) intended to get their rabbit vaccinated every year as is recommended by welfare centre staff during adoption. However the remainder either had not had their rabbit vaccinated since being adopted or were not sure how often vaccination was required. Calicivirus is prevalent in New Zealand and highly contagious with death occurring in almost 100% of rabbits. Death is caused by cardiac and respiratory failure and although it can occur quickly rabbits will often suffer from anorexia, depression, fever, nosebleeds, and convulsions. Vaccination is the best way of preventing a rabbit from contracting the disease.

The welfare centre desexes rabbits prior to adoption and encourages people to provide their rabbit with a companion rabbit as there is much evidence of the benefits of group housing (Held *et al* 2001, Gunn and Morton 1995, Chu *et al* 2003). Given that this is the case the number of people who did house their rabbit with a companion was relatively low at 45.7% and as such many rabbits are being deprived of the opportunity to carry out natural social behaviours. For those respondents with multiple rabbits a Chi Square analysis indicated that multiple rabbits were not provided with any more floor space than single rabbits ($\chi^2=19.25$, $d=18$, $P=0.375$). Spatial restriction may compromise the welfare of rabbits, especially those with reduced access to outdoor spaces.

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