

SESSION OVERVIEW

Dr. David Gies

Panel members were Esther Mechler, Dr. Hugh Wheir, and Sean Hawkins (see separate documents for individual presenters' materials).

At the Third International Symposium, David Gies of the Animal Assistance Foundation moderated a panel that included Esther Mechler, director of SPAY/USA; Hugh Wheir, DVM, founder and executive director, Animal Alliance (standing in for Andrew Rowan); and Sean Hawkins, executive director of Saving Animals Across Borders (SAAB). The panel addressed the topic of nonsurgical sterilization, reviewing pet population needs in the United States and Latin America and the worldwide status of controlling random breeding of companion animals.

Why should we care? The session was opened with a question by **David Gies**: “Who needs a nonsurgical sterilant anyway?” He went on to observe that pets are everywhere. In the United States, there are more pets in households than there are children. Dogs and cats are everywhere. Can you think of a day when you don’t see a dog or a cat?

In the *Wall Street Journal* on October 27, 2006, an entire front page was devoted to the topic “What your pet is thinking.” Researchers around the world are pioneering tantalizing evidence that animals not only learn and remember, but they may also have consciousness – in other words, they may be capable of thinking about their thoughts and knowing that they know.

The article reports that while “researchers have yet to attain proof that animals are self-aware, the findings already have broad implications. For the 69 million U.S. households that own a pet, such knowledge might lead owners to question their animal companions’ awareness of what they’re fed, how they’re housed and how often the kitty litter is changed. All of that would be a boon for the pet industry which generates \$38 billion in annual revenue.”

That is to say, consumers care a great deal about their pets; owners are willing to pay for expanding products and services. The *Wall Street Journal*’s point is that the market for companion animal products is likely to continue to expand. So what of this expanding market for companion animals? Is there a market for adding techniques to sterilize pets? Do consumers care?

Esther Mechler began the panel discussion by framing the question around past experiences of SPAY/USA, whose collaborative work and community achievements span the United States. In the last 15 years, the United States has witnessed a sharp decline in euthanasia, from 12 million animals to around 4.5 million in 2005. The reasons for this reduction include the establishment of a national network of programs, mobile clinics, spay blitzes, high-volume low-fee super clinics, emerging leadership, emphasis on

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underserved and isolated areas, and an increase in the popularity of trap/neuter/return (TNR) programs targeting feral cats.

While significant advances have been made, a plateau has been reached. Not much has changed over the past six years. Ms. Mechler suggested a national plan that would break through this stagnant situation. Something must be done to get to the next level of ending the euthanasia of unwanted animals.

Because we have reached a plateau, new tools and approaches are needed to cut the surplus of companion animals. The challenge now is to devise a new paradigm. We need to work together on a national plan to coordinate our resources and determine best practices. We need to develop leadership to carry on the work in the coming decades. And, given the fact that in many areas veterinarians are unable to keep up with the need for surgeries (long waiting time for appointments, areas without veterinarians, the rising cost of surgery to a level beyond the reach of the poor or working class), we need an affordable, effective and easy-to-distribute nonsurgical product to prevent unwanted litters. It is in the interest of all animal advocates, in the interest of veterinarians, and, of course, in the interest of those companion animals we now call “surplus.” It is time for a new paradigm – a shift in strategy for reducing the number of homeless animals.

Hugh Wheir, founder and executive director of Animal Alliance, presented for Dr. Andrew Rowan of the HSUS. Responding specifically to the question “Do we need a nonsurgical sterilant?” Dr. Wheir stated that, in the United States, the percentage of owned animals euthanized in shelters has dropped from 20% in 1973 to 4% in 2003. Surgical sterilization is a very important part of this positive trend.

Dogs in the developing world are another matter. The average number of dogs is about 10 canines for every 100 people. But this depends on where the sample is drawn. The range for ownership is two in urban areas to 35 in Mexican villages and among suburban white South Africans. The total population for dogs in developing countries is 400 to 600 million animals. This suggests a huge market for nonsurgical as well as surgical neutering.

Surgical approaches to population control in developing countries may follow the experiences of the United States. In this country, veterinarians changed their behavior toward pet overpopulation and so did pet owners, but perhaps to a lesser degree. The surgical approach is showing interesting success in developing countries such as Mexico, Bali Indonesia, India, the Bahamas and Galapagos. Nonsurgical approaches will have to meet a number of criteria to be successful in developing countries, as well as in the United States. To be successful, the cost per dose, including acquisition and delivery, will need to be under \$5 per dose. Cost is a more sensitive issue in developing countries. Tolerance for cost variation is less sensitive in the United States, but it will remain a factor.

Dr. Wheir stated that there were important issues to consider. First, the approach must provide for humane population control. It does not necessarily require a high-tech or

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expensive approach. Second, to be effective, we must have knowledge about the people's attitudes and behaviors toward pet population control. Third, and closely aligned with the previous issue, we must understand the function of the dog in that environment (i.e., is it used to guard, as a companion, or in hunting?). Finally, the ideal alternative to surgery will be an injectable; will not need special refrigeration or handling for remote delivery; will be a sterilant, not a contraceptive; and will diminish reproductive behaviors.

These issues go beyond how sterilization of the pet occurs. It lands squarely on the front-end work, enabling a veterinarian to practice in a developing country, its communities and neighborhoods.

Dr. Wheeler concluded by stating that we know killing animals does not work. It is not acceptable from a moral view and it simply does not control overpopulation of domesticated animals. The United States model for sterilizing pets has been very successful, but will it work in the developing world? We must address the cultural aspects. Also, the animal-welfare issues in developing countries – high puppy mortality, parasites and infections – need attention. New technology could be a breakthrough for all countries needing to manage companion animal populations.

Sean Hawkins, executive director of Saving Animals Across Borders (SAAB), reviewed his experience in using Neutersol[®] in Mexico and Puerto Rico, and potential for its use in other Latin American countries. Dog overpopulation in Mexico is at a crisis point – similar to the crisis observed in India and China. However, opportunities for products like Neutersol[®] are apparent and obvious. Rabies vaccination programs already exist in Mexico. The policy is to inoculate all canines against rabies. Adding a second injectable would be an effective enhancement, considering the existing infrastructure. Matching the need for pet population control with the governmental initiative appears to be in place. What is missing is consistent product to match emerging demand.

Mr. Hawkins pointed to the “cardboard city” in Juarez, Mexico, as a place that has benefited from the SAAB intervention program. Much more can be done; the work has just begun. Dogs in this community have no guardians, though they are friendly and socialized. They are fed table scraps and eat garbage. Canines are generally considered owned by no one but cared for by many – the classic community-owned animal. Medical care is not present, but the occasional MASH-style clinic delivers vaccinations and sterilization. Formal animal sheltering systems do not exist and government programs default to operating as “catch and kill” operations. Local veterinarians are eager to learn new technologies and frequently participate in SAAB's clinics. The event is popular among community residents, connecting pet enthusiasts with local veterinarians.

The Puerto Rico Veterinary Medical Association supports train-the-trainer programs in San Juan, Isabela and Aguadilla. The Pegasus Foundation provides training and materials translated into Spanish. SAAB's collaboration with communities is implemented in ways that do not enable collectors. Collaborations focus on making services available to pets of poor families by delivering inexpensive and immediate nonsurgical sterilization.

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According to Hawkins, the need for this type of solution is clear. Marketing is central, SAAB provides a proven template for replication and expansion.

So what does this mean for our question, Who needs a nonsurgical sterilant anyway? This panel began considering the justification for developing new sterilization techniques to reduce pet overpopulation. Is there sufficient demand and economic/philanthropic capacity to warrant the introduction of new sterilization techniques into both the United States and other countries?

We conclude that there is both the need and the market demand for nonsurgical sterilization. This demand exists in both the United States and in developing countries, but the approach to first-world economies will need to be tailored differently than the approach to third-world economies. Several factors account for this: In the United States, the reduction of pet euthanasia is being achieved through surgical procedures. Another factor contributing to a reduction of unwanted pets in the United States is the acceptance of sterilization by the veterinary community and owners. Pet sterilization is evolving into the cultural norm in the United States. This change in awareness has been essential to what has been achieved. No one is declaring victory, but progress is evident.

Introducing an inexpensive nonsurgical approach in the United States may be jettisoned by success in other countries. Indeed, the lessons learned from the introduction of the first canine injectable may require success elsewhere before introducing such procedures in the United States. Nevertheless, the horizon is bright for a new paradigm. The action needed to accomplish the new paradigm is clear. Information and awareness, along with product development, competitive price and marketing, will bring about expanded capacity to sterilize companion animals.