Victorian Cat Tracking Study – Part 2: After the adoption

Presenter: Linda Marston, Research Fellow, Monash University
Email: linda.marston@med.monash.edu.au

In many countries a greater number of cats are admitted to welfare agencies each year than can be rehomed (Bartlett, Bartlett, Walshaw, & Halstead 2005; Marston, Bennett, & Toukhsati 2006). In some places the oversupply of cats is so pronounced that it results in the majority of shelter cats being euthanised (Marston et al. 2006). It is likely that a combination of strategies will be required to reduce the shelter euthanasia of cats. These will include strategies to decrease admissions, increase adoptions and increase the retention of owned cats. Identifying effective ways to improve these statistics becomes even more essential if, as suggested by Lord et al. (2006), the number of cats admitted to shelters and pounds is increasing.

Research has focused on identifying factors associated with: the breakdown of owner-companion animal relationships (Ramon, Slater, Ward, & Lopez 2008); shelter admissions (Patronek, Glickman, Beck, McCabe, & Ecker 1996b; Marston, Bennett, & Coleman 2004; Marston, Bennett, & Coleman 2005b); shelter practices (Orihel & Fraser 2008; Murray, Skillings, & Gruffydd-Jones 2008); and identifying the fate of animals after shelter admission (Marston, Bennett, & Coleman 2005a). A survey of people who had adopted a shelter dog (Marston et al. 2005a) not only identified factors contributing to adoptive success but also identified that the problems experienced post-adoption can negatively effect the human-animal relationship and increase the risk of subsequent relinquishment (Marston et al., 2005a). Studies like these have contributed to reducing shelter euthanasia for dogs, yet there has been a dearth of scientific research pertaining to shelter cats. With the exception of one paper, which investigated rehoming of cats from a university research program (DiGangi, Crawford, & Levy, 2006), there is little information available regarding what happens to cats adopted from shelters and the problems experienced by the individuals who adopt them. This study addressed some of these gaps in knowledge.

A questionnaire was created based on information obtained from the scientific literature. It was refined after consultation with cat owners and an expert committee, comprised of representatives from shelter organisations, government, the veterinary profession, a microchip database management company and researchers. The questionnaire included questions aimed at identifying factors that influenced the adoption decision, described ownership practices, identified problems experienced and determined factors related to relinquishment. The questionnaire was administered during 2008, by a market research company who contacted 212 individuals who had previously adopted a cat in the Cat Tracking Study (Marston, Bennett, & Toukhsati 2006) and consented to participate in further research. By the time of survey, all of the cats had been adopted for a minimum of two years.

The household composition, education level and type of residence of the sample were generally representative of the Victorian population, with the exception of an above average income level. While rental rates were comparable to the general Victorian population, nearly one-third (29.2%) of the 48 people who rented their accommodation did not have (or did not know if they had) a 'Pets allowed" clause in their rental agreement.

The majority of participants (74.1%) had not performed any research about cats prior to adopting one. While just over half (56.1%) of the sample had planned, to some extent, to adopt a cat, 17% had made an impulsive decision. However, impulsivity was not associated with adoptive failure. The majority of adopted cats were young, with 60% aged less than three months of age and almost 80% aged less than one year of age at the time of adoption. Notably, people who adopted older cats were less satisfied with the adoption. Data were gathered regarding where the adopted cat spends most of it's time, these are presented below.

Table 1. Where does cat spend most of its time?

	Frequency	Percent
Confined in the living area of the family home	76	35.85
Free roaming	71	33.49
Moves freely indoors and outdoors via a cat door but confined to garden	36	16.98
Confined outside the house in the garden	16	7.55
Other	5	2.36
Confined outside the house in a run	5	2.36
Confined in a non-living part of the house e.g. basement	3	1.42
Total	**212**	**100.00**

As can be seen, the majority of the sample confined their cat in some way, either inside the home, outside it or some combination of inside and outside. The remainder allowed their cat to roam freely. This group tended to be largely comprised of people who lived on farms and acreages, although, surprisingly, 29.65% of people who lived in a house and 39.1% of those who lived in an apartment also allowed their cat to roam freely. Methods used to contain a cat in the owner's garden included a cat run (n=14), modifications to existing fences (n=5), supervising the cat when outside (n=4) and confinement to a balcony or garage (n=3).

Generally, cats were regarded as very affordable pets, although 14.2% of the sample reported experiencing some difficulty affording food for their cat, 39.2% experienced some difficulty affording veterinary care and 38.3% found holiday arrangements problematic. While people from lower income households reported greater difficulty in affording food and toys for their cats, these individuals did not report the same difficulty in affording holiday care. None of the cats was left to roam or fend for itself during holidays. People tended to use informal holiday care arrangements: 43.4% asked friends to feed the cat, 12.26% left the cat with friends/family, 10.85% left someone at home and 7.08% did not take holidays. There were statistically significant differences between age groups regarding the holiday arrangements made for their pets: younger people (aged 25 years or less) tended to take the pet to friends and family, people aged 26-55 tended to get friends to come and feed their cat and people aged 56 years and over tended to use boarding facilities. The use of informal cat care during holidays may explain why holiday care was not problematic for more participants.

As required by Victorian law, all cats were microchipped and registered prior to release from shelter. Owners are required to re-register them annually thereafter. At the time of survey, 88.2% were registered with the local council. The vast majority (91.5%) of cats were identified externally in some way: by microchip tag (173), council registration tags (108), engraved tags (66) or some other form of identification (4). The owner's gender, age or income did not affect whether they identified their cat, registered it or displayed a microchip tag on its collar, although where people lived did. People who lived in a townhouse, or on acreage, tended to put a collar on their cat, while those living on farms did not. Also the type of identification used varied with regularity of veterinary visits. Cats that saw a veterinarian regularly were significantly more likely to wear engraved tags and somewhat more likely to wear multiple forms of identification than those who did not. Most (64%) cats wore multiple forms of identification with microchip tags the most common form, worn by 81.8% of registered cats (compared with 57.8% of registered cats who wore registration tags). This suggests that owners may view microchip tags as a more useful form of identification than registration tags.

Seventeen participants, or 8% of the sample, had experienced some sort of life circumstance that made cat ownership problematic in some way. Five participants had a baby, three had family members that developed allergies to the cat, two lived in areas where local laws were changed to require 24-hour cat curfews, two moved to rental accommodation, two found cat ownership too expensive, one participant experienced a relationship breakup and another had problems with neighbours. Eight (47.1%) of these individuals did not retain their cat. These eight animals formed 30.7% of the total 26 cats that were no longer owned by their adopter. The outcomes for the 26 cats that were no longer retained by their owners were: the cat had died (n=9), cat was returned to a shelter (n=8), cat ran away (n=4), the cat was rehomed privately (3), the cat was euthanised for a non-behavioural reason (n=1) and the fate of the last one is unknown.

Farm cats tended not to wear a collar. This is of some concern, since all of these cats were permitted to roam freely. The absence of an easily visible, external form of identification on a cat is a barrier to ensuring that lost pets reach shelters quickly and reduces their chance of being reclaimed by their owner. The failure of farm cats to wear collars may be due to their owners being less prepared to spend money on their cats, or because they are less concerned that their cat might wander from their property or possibly because they are concerned that the cat might be injured by snagging a collar in the complex farm environment. It does not seem that financial reasons are the likely reason as farm cats were taken to the veterinarian at the same rate as other cats and their owners did not report that owning a cat was unaffordable.

Success levels and reasons for failure were similar to those identified in the university research program rehoming study (DiGangi et al. 2006). Notably, most of the reasons given for adoptive failure were not cat-related but either owner-centric or environmental, such as changes in bylaws, neighbour complaints and problems with existing pets. Therefore, adoptive failures are unlikely to be significantly reduced by changes in shelter assessment or husbandry practices. A possible exception to this is the adoption of older cats, where owners were less satisfied with their animals similar to previous findings (Patronek, Glickman, Beck, McCabe, & Ecker 1996a). If the factors associated with this reduction in owner satisfaction can be addressed, then it may be possible to reduce the risk of relinquishment for these animals.

Unlike existing research (Patronek et al. 1996a), accommodation-related issues were not significantly associated with adoptive failure in this study. However, there was a slight, but statistically non-significant, increased risk of relinquishment associated with owners living in rented accommodation. Somewhat worrying is the finding that almost a third of 'renters' did not know if they had a 'pets allowed' clause in their rental contract. This could put these pets at risk of relinquishment should a landlord discover a pet on the premises. Increasing the availability of pet-friendly rental accommodation is likely to reduce accommodation related reasons for relinquishment. Therefore, it would be productive to enter into discussions with key stakeholders in real estate to see if this is possible and to identify any barriers that exist to doing so. Retirement communities should also be included in these discussions as many of them either do not welcome pets, only allow an owner to keep an existing pet until it dies, or limit the size of animal that can be taken into the community, forcing elderly people to part with their pets.

Such restrictions also reduce the number of homes available for animals.

All cats were microchipped and registered prior to adoption and the majority of the cat owners (88.2%) had re-registered their cat with their local council. This figure agrees closely with that identified through council benchmarking (Van de Kuyt 2004). While registration with councils is mandated in Victoria, microchip tags appear to be preferred over registration tags as a method of identification. This suggests that it may be possible to streamline animal management procedures by incorporating council registration details onto the microchip databases, rather than maintaining separate databases and issuing registration tags. Admittedly, there would be many administrative issues to resolve, but it may be worthwhile conducting a cost-benefit analysis of such a strategy. A few cats were returned to the shelter because of regulatory changes requiring 24-hour cat confinement and it would be beneficial to monitor shelter and pound statistics following legislative change, to ensure that the desired results are produced and that there are no unforeseen consequences.

Whilst cats are generally perceived as 'affordable' pets, veterinary care and holiday arrangements are problematic for some owners, with about one-sixth of adopters finding that providing food for their cat was financially somewhat problematic. It is likely that cat relinquishments may increase during times of financial hardship and pound/shelter statistics should be monitored to identify the impact of social issues upon pet ownership and relinquishment.

The relatively high percentage of cats allowed to roam unsupervised is a cause for concern as it increases the likelihood of unplanned reproduction occurring. Perhaps owners allowed their cat to wander unsupervised because they have concerns regarding the effects of long-term confinement on cat welfare. Further research should be conducted to determine this, however continuing community education should include reasons to prevent roaming and provide evidence that confinement is not detrimental to cat welfare.

Overall, cat adoptions were very successful. Whilst some refinements in the matching and adoption procedures may marginally improve adoption and retention rates it seems that, in order to achieve a significant reduction in shelter euthanasia, the emphasis must be on reducing the numbers of cats entering pounds and shelters.

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