

Cats vs. Dogs

We know that cats and dogs differ. They differ behaviorally, anatomically, and often medically, but are they different when it comes to welfare issues?

Consider the elective procedures of ear cropping and declawing. Now consider if you would view these procedures differently if they were applied to cats instead of dogs or dogs instead of cats. Would cropping the ears of a cat be more unacceptable than if done to a dog? Would declawing a dog that was damaging an owner's possessions be more unacceptable than declawing a cat that was damaging the same possessions? Is there a double standard between cats and dogs, or just species differences? With regard to welfare issues, we all have opinions, and as a profession, we are changing.

In 1976, the AVMA adopted a policy on ear cropping in dogs, which by comparison to today's policy, would be considered weak. In that policy, the AVMA recommended to the AKC and "appropriate breed associations" that cropped or trimmed ears be deleted from breed standards, and further, that dogs with cropped ears born after a "reasonable future date" be prohibited from showing. As of today, the AKC has taken no such action.

Twenty-three years later, in 1999, the AVMA's adopted policy on ear cropping evolved to state that ear cropping in dogs for cosmetic reasons is "not medically indicated nor of benefit to the patient." The policy went on to say that the procedure "caused pain and distress." Even after those statements, the policy stopped short of opposing the practice. Instead, it stated that veterinarians should "counsel" dog owners of these facts prior to agreeing to perform the procedure.

The policy that stands today was adopted in 2008. It clearly and simply states that the AVMA "opposes ear cropping and tail docking of dogs when done solely for cosmetic purposes." It also encourages the elimination of ear cropping and tail docking from breed standards. The AKC recognizes 20 breeds that include ear cropping in the breed standard, however dogs without cropped ears are not disqualified from showing.

Interestingly, the current AVMA policy (adopted in 2014) on the declawing of domestic cats is reminiscent of the 1999 policy on ear cropping in dogs. In the policy, the AVMA acknowledges that "onychectomy is an amputation and should be regarded as a major surgery," but does not oppose it outright. Also similar to the 1999 policy, but more definitive, the AVMA "strongly encourages" client education prior to the consideration of declawing. Included are points of "understanding and disclosure" to inform veterinarians and cat owners of issues regarding cat behavior and declawing.

The policy states that declawing should be considered only after attempts have been made to curb clawing behavior or when clawing presents an "above normal health risk" for its owner(s). When an owner expresses health concerns, an excellent resource on zoonosis prevention is available online at the CDC's Healthy Pets Healthy People website (www.cdc.gov/healthypets). For immunocompromised people, a Safe Pet

Guidelines Guide is available through PAWS (Pets are Wonderful Support) at www.shanti.org/paws_pdf/Safe_Pet_Guidelines.pdf. These resources provide owners with information they can discuss with their healthcare providers to determine if declawing their cat is a necessity.

The AVMA has a policy opposing cosmetic ear cropping in dogs - a procedure done to meet the desires of humans rather than for the benefit of the dog. The AVMA's policy on declawing, arguably done to meet the desires of humans rather than for the benefit of the cat, defers to the division of opinion within the profession. Whether it will change is yet to be seen.

Cats and dogs are both subject to the will of their owners. It is imperative that we educate ourselves and our clients to provide both cats and dogs with the equal welfare protections that they deserve.