

Invited experts:

- Els Peeters Odisee, Agro and biotechnology

2 Meeting dates

28/09/2017, 09/11/2017, 04/05/2017

3 Summary of meeting findings

Introduction and context

- Castration or sterilisation renders cats infertile.

Castration is the removal of the genitals, both in male and female animals. The testes are removed in male cats, the ovaries, and sometimes the uterus, in females.

Sterilisation does not involve the removal of the genitals, but rather the cutting and sealing of the fallopian tubes or sperm ducts. The animals are rendered infertile, yet remain hormonally intact. Their behaviour therefore remains the same, including being in heat and spraying. Thus, sterilisation is almost never performed.

However, one commonly speaks of castration in male cats and sterilisation in female cats, even though their ovaries are removed. This same meaning is applied in this document.

Early castration or early sterilisation is the castration or sterilisation of kittens - both male and female - prior to reaching fertile age (approximately 4 to 5 months) (please refer to www.huidierinfo.be).

- In 2009, the Federal Council for Animal Welfare published an opinion detailing measures pertaining to the stray cat problem and overpopulation in shelters. This opinion proposed a mandatory identification, registration and sterilisation of all domestic cats (with an exception for breeders). This was implemented by the Royal Order of 3 August 2012 pertaining to the long-term plan for the sterilisation of domestic cats, making the sterilisation of all cats for trade mandatory in addition to their identification and registration. The option of the final step, universal compulsory identification, registration and sterilisation, was provided yet not mandated.

Evaluation capabilities and limitations

- Figures collated annually by the Government of Flanders Animal Welfare Service by means of a survey of shelters, indicates that the number of cats being brought into shelters is continuing to rise (13% increase in 2013-2015). The fact that the long-term plan for reducing the stray cat population and the number of cats in shelters has borne insufficient results, can be attributed to several factors:
 - insufficient knowledge of the legislation;
 - a lack of compliance;
 - the difficulty in monitoring;

- the lack of a central cat registry;
- too short an evaluation period (gradual implementation from August 2012, full application from September 2014, latest figures from 2015).

The collated data has its limitations. Concerns include:

- Varying number of respondents who participate voluntarily in the surveys;
- Regionalisation of animal welfare: Belgium figures versus those of Flanders;
- Compulsory early castration/sterilisation: longer stay in shelter, thus reduced capacity;
- Numerous small-scale homing projects (with or without foster families) that potentially result in fewer animals ending up in shelters, yet are not registered anywhere and thus not included in the figures;
- Suspected under-representation of shelter euthanasia figures for fear of adversely impacting reputation with the general public - no idea about the reasons for euthanasia (disease, character, overcrowding?);
- Short evaluation period;
- No data on the number of animals that are returned after homing and the reasons for this (poor matching, character?);
- Origins of cats taken in by shelters (stray cats versus unwanted litters from private individuals).

Sound reliability of the collated data is highly desirable. Thus, in order to obtain an accurate idea of the number of stray or domestic cats entering and leaving shelters, the various alternative initiatives and (contract) veterinarians must be surveyed in addition to the accredited shelters. And shelters don't always dare to present accurate figures on the number of euthanised kittens/cats for fear of public opinion and a consequent reduction in donations. Nevertheless, animal shelters bear a responsibility for providing information on the problem of shelter overpopulation, and truthful figures are required to correctly estimate such problems and correctly evaluate the results of the adopted measures.

- Shelters are succeeding in homing a larger proportion of these cats via adoption (20% more adoptions). This higher number may possibly be explained by several factors:
 - Increased awareness pertaining to the adoption of cats from shelters. The emergence of homing campaigns via matching is increasingly being put into practice, which certainly attracts prospective adopters. As it increases the chance of successful homing, this practice should be further expanded.
 - Shelter sterilisation results in the homing of cats that are 'fully compliant' (identified, registered and sterilised). A disadvantage of this is the budgetary burden placed on shelters. Another is that adopters are not forced to visit their own vet in the short term, and thus risk being less aware of their responsibilities pertaining to animal welfare, animal health and public health.
- No data on (the evolution in) the number of stray cats in Flanders currently exists. The Animal Welfare Service did question the cities and municipalities about their approach and the results of their homing and stray cat policies. This indicated that a large majority of cities and municipalities actively pursue a policy and that significant budgets are made available for this, although these are typically exhausted before year-end. The majority of stray cats comprise cats that are dumped, or missing domestic cats and their offspring. Compulsory sterilisation could stabilise this number and ultimately reduce it.

- Compulsory sterilisation of all cats should result in a decrease in the number of cats entering shelter accommodation. And, ultimately, the euthanasia of cats due to an excessive intake would no longer be necessary.
- According to an IPSOS survey commissioned by GAIA, 87% of citizens are in favour of the compulsory sterilisation of all cats.
- Ghent University conducted a survey amongst Flemish and Walloon practice veterinarians on the issues and opinions surrounding early castration. Slightly more than 50% of the vets questioned perform early castration on kittens. A minority recommend this to their clients. Their greatest concern is the risk associated with anaesthesia, which is also the most frequently mentioned complication. Other concerns include the stress experienced by the kittens and the development of FLUTD ('Feline Lower Urinary Tract Disease'). There is a clear need to inform and train veterinarians. Few issues are observed in terms of health and behaviour as a consequence of the cat's early castration in the long term. Nearly half of the veterinarians questioned consider early castration an effective way of tackling the overpopulation of stray and shelter cats.
- Within the context of the working group, a short survey on early castration was conducted amongst pedigree cat breeders. 169 respondents completed the survey. 70.0% have had kittens castrated. More than half have had more than 10 kittens castrated. 12.6% experienced problems, whilst 87.4% indicated that they experienced no problems. Overall, very few problems, either physical or behaviour-related, were reported. 74.0% of breeders have encountered benefits with the early castration of kittens and 70.0% are in favour of this.
- The mandatory identification and sterilisation of cats that are sold is actively monitored.

The Animal Welfare Inspectorate of the Government of Flanders drafted 116 warnings during the first ten months of 2016.

The launch of the database for the I&R of cats (scheduled for 2017) will offer an additional control mechanism. The identification and registration of cats offers additional benefits such as reuniting lost cats with their owners, facilitating the use of chip-operated cat flaps, and identifying traffic victims. For these reasons, the possession of a chip reader is recommended for municipal authorities, care providers and volunteers.

Decisions pertaining to the sterilisation obligation

- The proposed decoupling of identification/registration and sterilisation for accredited and registered breeders will result in novice cat owners coming into contact with a veterinarian as early as possible, enabling other aspects of responsible ownership to be addressed:
 - Animal welfare aspects: what are the cat's needs and requirements?
 - Animal health aspects: what are the options for promoting the cat's optimal health and longevity?
 - Public health aspects: what is required to protect the health of the owner and their family?

It is important that those adopting cats from shelters also consult a veterinarian for the above reasons. The adopter should be able to designate an accompanying veterinarian (of their own choice) in the case of adoption. Once the animal shelter has forwarded the medical file of the adopted animal to the chosen veterinarian, the veterinarian can contact the owner

for further follow-up.

- Further encouragement and support of local initiatives for tackling stray cat problems is also imperative. Particularly considering that a significant portion of the animals brought into shelters belong to this population.
The emphasis must be placed on a global approach across the entire Flemish territory. The system used in the province of Limburg (costing 0.34 Euros per resident) can serve as a model for the other provinces. This should preferably be imposed by law.
- Veterinary associations highlight the fact that cities, municipalities and shelters all strive to obtain reduced prices from veterinarians when performing sterilisations in the context of stray cat campaigns, which according to them can be at the expense of the quality of veterinary care and the health of the animals.
- Since feral cats are more difficult to catch, there is a risk that they escape the sterilisation campaigns and therefore reproduce more than the calmer domestic cat. The possibility that stray cats (which are offered for adoption) are consequently less healthy and less socialised in the long term was discussed: feral kittens can surely still be socialised if they are found early enough and the necessary effort is made. In addition, stray cats in Flanders invariably descend from domesticated cats and thus have the genetic potential for socialisation.
- Continuous attention must be paid to maintaining a sufficiently large genetic pool, particularly for pedigree cats. Suggestions for this include the application of effective breeding practices, involving as diverse a breeding material as possible and reviewing the judging of cat shows. Breeders' associations, individual breeders and veterinarians all have an important responsibility in this.
- A sterilisation policy must be supported by a continuous awareness campaign in which all stakeholders (veterinarians, authorities, breeders, owners, etc.) fulfil their role. Promoting responsible ownership is particularly central to this.
Consideration must be given to an effective approach which reaches all layers of society, including those who do not visit a veterinarian and those who do not visit the huisdierinfo.be website (information pertaining to pet ownership)

Raising awareness is also an ongoing necessity and an indispensable addition to legislation that is difficult to monitor. This requires the necessary budget.

4 Presentations

- Animal Welfare Service, 2016. Long-term plan and Identification and Registration of Cats. Presentation
- Animal Welfare Service, 2016. Results of survey amongst cities/municipalities on stray and domestic cat policy (conducted by the Animal Welfare Service).

Presentation

- Moons Christel, 2016. Results from survey amongst Flemish and Walloon veterinarians on early castration.

Presentation

- Peeters Els, 2016. Attitudes on chipping amongst Flemish veterinarians, shelters and owners: survey results. Presentation
- Animal Welfare Service, 2016. Evolution of shelter intake figures. Presentation
- Peeters Els, 2016. Breeder experience pertaining to early castration in pedigree cats.

Presentation

5 Opinion approval by Council of Animal Welfare

Approved on 14/06/2017.