

Today's Veterinary **Business**

BUSINESS ONYCHECTOMIES



The business of body modification

Should veterinarians perform declaw surgery? For some practitioners, the answer is “no.” For others, it’s “yes.” Even VCA is split.

By Sarah Rumble

Self-proclaimed crazy cat lady Jen Weston, CVT, LVT, is known throughout her community as the person to call when an animal needs help. Weston, the practice manager and co-owner of Northfield Veterinary Hospital in Denver, has pulled dogs out of trash bins, bottle-fed orphaned baby squirrels, and rescued countless cats and kittens.

When possible, the dogs and cats Weston rescues and nurses back to health are adopted to people she knows in the neighborhood. But she won't adopt to just anyone.

“I’ve actually turned potential adopters down

because they wanted to have a cat declawed,” said Weston, who also convinced her business partner, Shelly Sandel, DVM, that they should ban declaw procedures in their hospital.

By November 2017, when

Denver voted to ban declaw procedures citywide, Weston and Sandel had made the decision to stop.

“We decided to implement that policy whether the legislation went through in Denver or not,” Weston explained.



To Ban or Not to Ban?

Denver isn't the only city to ban feline declaw. Several cities in California, two Canadian provinces, and multiple other cities and municipalities around the United States and the world have either banned declaw or are considering legislation. In May 2018, VCA Canada banned elective declaw at all of its 100 practices.

"One of our underlying themes at VCA is that we don't dictate medicine, so we have to be very careful with things like this," said Danny Joffe, DVM, DABVP (Canine/Feline), national medical director for general practices for VCA Canada. "We surveyed our veterinarians and they were massively in support of a declaw ban."

Eighty of the 82 veterinarians surveyed were initially in support of a ban. "After discussing it with the two opposed, they actually came onside as well," Dr. Joffe said. "So, we were able to reach consensus."

Research helped solidify the choice for VCA Canada. "Pain and Adverse Behavior in Declawed Cats," published in the *Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery*, evaluated 137 declawed and 137 non-declawed

cats. The study found that the declawed cats were statistically significantly more likely to have shown aggressive behavior, biting, back pain, barbering and inappropriate elimination than cats that were not declawed. Also, 63 percent of the declawed cats showed evidence via radiograph of poor surgical technique, with remnants of the third phalanx (P3) remaining.

Those opposed to declaw bans often contend that more cats will be relinquished to shelters because of inappropriate scratching. In fact, several California animal shelters released data showing that relinquishments in the five years since local bans were enacted actually decreased.

For VCA Canada, reaching a consensus was easy, but VCA U.S., which operates more than 800 hospitals nationwide, faces challenges.

"There are so many organizations working on this and so many geographical differences in the U.S.," said Todd Tams, DVM, DACVIM, chief medical officer of VCA U.S. "Even in the state of California, where some areas have banned it, there are still so many varying opinions."

In 2016, a bill that would have banned declaw in New Jersey didn't make it out of committee. Karan Oberhansley, DVM, owner of Whitehouse Veterinary Hospital in Whitehouse Station, New Jersey, wrote a letter opposing the bill.

"The reason I'm in favor of declaws is because cats are cats, and they use their claws, and they can be quite destructive," said Dr. Oberhansley, who has declawed more than 2,000 cats, including all three of hers, since graduating from veterinary school in 1979.

According to Dr. Oberhansley, several circumstances warrant declaw, including when cats are destroying property, when people have small children, and when people are immunocompromised or on blood thinners. She also believes that declawing is a personal decision the owner should be able to make.

"It's the right of a person to declaw his cat. And I don't think the government should [prohibit] it," Dr. Oberhansley said. "We're materialistic people. We like our property. We don't like to get scratched. So, those are the reasons: property, health and it's a

personal choice."

Dr. Tams said most veterinarians he talks to are "sincerely vested" in trying to reduce the number of declaw procedures they perform.

"We're on the right track," he said. "I think it's going to get there, it's just going to take some time."

The Declaw Controversy

It's no secret that declaw is a controversial topic. Dr. Oberhansley believes that veterinarians who use poor surgical technique are to blame for the controversy.

"It can be done properly and it can be done improperly," she said. "When I was taught in veterinary school, I was taught to use a Resco, which is a nail clipper. And basically, you put the claw in there and you cut it, and you try to leave a little piece of the bone with the tendon. It makes a huge hole, and people can take off the pad or leave a piece of the bone to regrow. It's barbaric. I would never allow that to be done in my practice."

During her internship in small animal medicine and surgery at the Michigan State University College of Veterinary Medicine, Dr. Oberhansley learned to declaw properly — using blade

disarticulation — from British surgeon Richard Walshaw, BVMS, DACVS.

"You use a scalpel blade to push the skin back, cut the edge of the skin, carefully cut the tendons and remove the bone so no piece is in there — it's a small hole — and then suture the hole shut," Dr. Oberhansley said. "No pad is removed. No bone is left in place. And, when done in little kittens, they are bouncing back the next day."

Aubrey J. Lavizzo, DVM, state director for the anti-declaw group The Paw Project, calls the surgery "mutilation."

"If you look at the definition of mutilation, it's the unnecessary amputation of a body part," said Dr. Lavizzo, who spearheaded the declaw ban effort in Denver and worked with other veterinary professionals to get it passed.

What the Associations Say

The American Veterinary Medical Association, the American Animal Hospital Association, the American Association of Feline Practitioners and the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association all oppose elective declaw and encourage client education, but their language varies.

EDUCATING CLIENTS

When Denver was considering declaw legislation, the goal was to educate the public, not punish veterinarians, said Northfield Veterinary Hospital co-owner Jen Weston, CVT, LVT.

"It was about educating the public and having that conversation with pet owners where we say, 'Hey, it's actually illegal.' And people are like, 'Wait, why? I didn't know it was so bad. What do you mean?'" Weston said. "The goal in Denver was to really start that conversation from an education standpoint."

VCA's U.S. hospitals also aim to educate pet owners.

"We try really hard not to do this procedure," said chief medical officer Todd Tams, DVM, DACVIM. "Our focus has been to proactively talk about the controversy with our medical and leadership teams and with clients to educate everyone on new recommendations and alternatives."

"When a client asks to have a cat declawed, the doctor has a conversation with the client in the room, explains the procedure and offers alternative options. We're able to successfully dissuade clients from doing it in most cases."

Some alternatives to declaw include:

- Environmental enrichment, including tall, sturdy scratching posts in appropriate areas of the home.
- Regular play to reduce boredom and aggression.
- Feline pheromone sprays to redirect the cat to more desirable scratching materials.
- Nail trimming about every two weeks.
- Artificial nail covers.
- Double-sided tape to deter cats from scratching the edges of furniture.
- Positive reinforcement when the cat scratches appropriately, including treats and verbal praise.

Last summer, the Fear Free organization launched the Fear Free Feline Destructive Scratching Solutions course, which arms veterinary professionals with resources to give to pet owners. Complimentary to all professionals signed up for the Fear Free certification program, the course is RACE approved for one hour in the scientific category.

Some notable differences in the position statements include:

SCIENTIFIC DATA

- **AVMA:** "There is no scientific evidence that declawing leads to behavioral abnormalities when the behavior of declawed cats is compared with that of cats in control groups."

- **AAHA:** "AAHA believes the current data regarding behavioral issues following declaw is insufficient and will evaluate new scientific information as it becomes available."
- **CVMA:** "Both acute and chronic pain in felines can result in an increase in behaviors such as inappro-

priate elimination, excessive vocalization and increased aggression. The CVMA believes that current studies on long-term behavioral effects as a result of PDA [partial digital amputation] are insufficient to draw firm conclusions about its role in causing chronic pain."



ETHICS

- **AAFP:** "Feline declawing is an ethically controversial procedure."
- **CVMA:** "With or without concrete scientific evidence, ethical consideration has to be given to the welfare of the animal. Veterinarians need to consider what advantages non-medically driven PDAs offer to the feline. Viable alternatives to PDAs exist. Therefore, from an ethical viewpoint, the CVMA views this surgery as unacceptable as it offers no advantage to the feline and the lack of scientific evidence leaves us unable to predict the likelihood of long-term behavioral and physical negative side effects."

RELINQUISHMENT

- **AAHA:** "Declawing may warrant consideration as an alternative to relinquishment or euthanasia, but only after extensive education and presentation of other strategies to manage scratching

MORE FROM THE AVMA

In light of the 2017 study "Pain and Adverse Behavior in Declawed Cats," published in the Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery, the American Veterinary Medical Association issued the following statement for this article:

"AVMA's declaw policy will come up for review in 2019 as part of our regular five-year policy review cycle. During this period, our board of directors will consider input from AVMA members and an updated scientific literature review on declawing. AVMA members can provide their feedback by clicking on the policy link at www.avma.org/declaw. AVMA continues to actively advocate for scientific research that improves animal health and welfare."

behavior. Many declawed cats are still relinquished to shelters — declawing does not guarantee that cats will remain in households."

- **CVMA:** "Partial digital amputation is not considered to be a justifiable alternative to relinquishment."

"There's a very fine line [these organizations] cross when they say that declawing is sometimes medically necessary," Dr. Lavizzo said. "Well, if it's medically necessary, it's not declawing. If it's medically necessary, it's an amputation."

The Effect on Staff

Well-being in the veterinary profession is under the microscope, and Dr. Lavizzo thinks part of the problem is that veterinary professionals

are sometimes forced to compromise their values.

"When I talk to veterinary students and veterinary school applicants, I talk about values. And the value that resonates highest in most veterinary students is empathy," he said. "Sadly, that is the value that is compromised when we have to do declaws. Declawing creates internal ethical struggles for many young veterinarians because when we declaw cats we are empathizing with the client, not with the patient: the cat."

Dr. Lavizzo, who recently sold his Denver practice after 45 years of ownership, banned declawing at his hospital more than 20 years ago.

"I decided at one point that I just couldn't do it anymore based on the effect it had on me, my staff and certainly the cats," he said.

While interviewing

potential new associates, Dr. Lavizzo made it known that declaws were banned at his practice. "They were all very thankful that they wouldn't have to do that," he said.

Veterinary nurses benefit when practices stop performing declaws, Dr. Lavizzo said.

"They have to deal with all the negatives when we do declaws," he said. "They have to do the follow-up and change the bandages and see the cats screaming and crying. By not performing this procedure, we've ethically elevated the profession and made the lives of technicians a lot better, too."

The Effect on Revenue

Dr. Tams, of VCA U.S., said declaw revenue doesn't amount to much.

"We have hospitals that might do one to four total procedures in a year, so there's no concern at all

about the business side of it," he said. "It's really the relationship with the client, and doctors in the exam rooms trying to make sure that cats stay in their homes, and distressed clients being able to do something if they feel it's really

clients," he said.

Dr. Lavizzo received positive feedback and said the no-declaw policy helped to grow revenue at his hospital.

"A new client would come in and ask for vaccinations, a spay and a declaw for their cat," Dr.

the money,' and then they'd go home and tell other people that 'This guy could have made a lot more money but chose not to. He's a pretty good guy. You can trust him,'" Dr. Lavizzo said. "And then those family and friends would come in, and now

"I had a petition at my office and collected 400 signatures from clients to allow them to declaw their cats," she said. "People don't declaw their cats because they hate them. They want them in their house, they want them in their bed, they want them to be part of their family."

For Weston, revenue was never a concern when her Denver hospital implemented a declaw ban.

"I'd like to see declawing banned everywhere, but I don't know that we'll ever see a blanket ban," she said. "There's a lot of work to be done, but, as a cat advocate, I love that we're taking steps toward rec-



necessary."

But in cities or hospitals where the procedure is banned, will clients asking for declaws go elsewhere? Could revenue be lost?

Dr. Joffe, of VCA Canada, said he didn't know of any clients who left a practice because of the ban. "I do know that we've received a lot of positive comments from

Lavizzo explained. "I would say, 'You know what? I'll do a spay and vaccinations, but I can't do a declaw, and here's why.'"

Most clients appreciated his explanation and trusted him more because he wouldn't perform a billable procedure just to increase his bottom line, he said.

"They'd say, 'Wow, he doesn't really care about

we've got a relationship built on trust the very first time people walk in the door."

Dr. Oberhansley said her New Jersey clients were not in favor of the state's proposed declaw ban.

ognizing that cats matter and their pain matters and their health care matters. When it comes to health care, cats are underserved, and I'm happy to see the progress being made on this front." ■

Sarah Rumble is an award-winning veterinary writer and editor living in Denver. Her cat, Leo, uses his scratching posts often and has become accustomed to regular nail trimmings.