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Dogs and cats outnumber owners

By MICHELLE SMITH

The American Humane Association estimates that between 2,000 and 3,500 dogs and cats are born hourly in the United States. And the number of animals may greatly exceed the number of responsible owners.

"The ultimate solution depends on extensive public education in owner responsibility, revision and enforcement of animal control policies and institution of effective birth control methods," said Michael W. Riggs, a biomedical science student at Texas A&M University who is currently researching the problem.

Dr. George C. Shelton, dean of veterinary medicine at Texas A&M, says there's no single solution. "We have to approach the surplus from every standpoint that could conceivably offer a solution," he said. "If every veterinarian in the



country went to work just spaying and neutering animals, it would not make that big a dent in the pet population. They could work from daylight until dark and it still wouldn't solve the problem," Shelton said. "There are only 30,000 veterinarians in the United States, and the problem is bigger than they can handle."

The problem is compounded by carefree breeding of the animals.

"Efforts to handle the problem created by the surplus can be channeled into two basic approaches," said Riggs. Either more dogs and cats could be destroyed or the birth rate could be decreased," Riggs said.

Euthanasia (mercy killing), is the most widely-used method to destroy unwanted animals. The American Humane Association said it should only be employed when an animal is too young, too old, or unhealthy; when the number of homeless animals exceeds the number of suitable homes; or when daily maintenance of animals becomes physically or economically impossible for the owner.

There are two common methods of euthanasia. The first is injection of a barbiturate, which is expensive and requires administration by a professional. Improper injection can cause a painful death. The second technique involves use of a gas chamber.

Strict regulation of control laws would reduce the number of dogs and cats that must be euthanized in population-control efforts. According to an interim report of the American Veterinary Medical Association, elected officials have been derelict in providing for and enforcing animal control laws.

Lou Odle, city manager of Bryan, says there is a city ordinance that prohibits keeping or harboring more than four dogs older than three months of age at a residence. Odle also said that owners may not let their animals run at large.

Pet owners in College Station can't have more than five dogs, said Keith Foltermann, humane officer for College Station.

Alvin Price, professor of veterinary physiology at Texas A&M, said surplus animals are a real threat, particularly in urban areas. He said that animal-control laws are not enforced like they should be because people still violate the city ordinances.

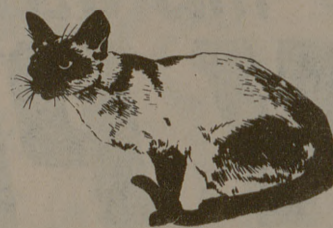
Dr. Bobby J. Cargill, a veterinarian, agrees.

"Better enforcement of the laws is necessary, he said. "A lady came in to the clinic today who had six or seven cats and ten kittens. She said she would like to have her animals spayed, but she couldn't afford it."

"Until an owner controls birth, he is not properly caring for the animals," explained Cargill.

"Revisions of existing animal shelter policies is also needed," said Riggs. "Pet adopters are not adequately interviewed to determine if they possess sufficient responsibility to care for animals. The result of this lack of screening in placing dogs and cats is why a large percentage of adopted animals end up as strays."

An organization in Houston, the Citizens for Animal Protection, is working to make sure pets find responsible owners. Owners must agree to keep the adopted pet confined in a fenced yard or in the



house, providing that the pet is walked frequently.

All animals placed by the organization are weaned, are at least six weeks old, are in good health and are surgically sterilized.

"Surgical sterilization is advantageous to the pet and the owner," Riggs said. "The removal of reproductive organs makes them non-susceptible to disease. Neutering males makes them calmer, and more likely to stay at home; it also eliminates the 'spraying' that is characteristic of male cats."

The overall advantage, according to the American Humane Association, is the elimination of the problems associated with placing litters.

Spaying and neutering are major surgical procedures that are slow and costly. The veterinarian's time and the cost of his equipment make the procedure expensive.

Other methods of contraception are vaginal devices, steroid hormones, and hormonal antagonists like progesterone and "morning after" pills.

"At present, most of the money is not available to the public," Dr. Edwin Ellett, professor of veterinary medicine and surgery at Texas A&M. He said the Food and Drug Administration has yet to prove the injections and the laws don't favor some forms of control.

Ellett says the greatest number of complaints the city officials hear often about animal control funds in the budget remain low.

Texas receives \$10 million a year from the retail pet industry and none of this money is returned from taxes for research," Ellett said.

Even with more money for research, public education is solving the problem, said Shelton. Dorthea Robinson, a Bryan veterinarian who has been practicing nine years, agrees that public education is necessary.

"Many people don't know they can bring their dog in the morning after injection and get an unwanted pregnancy," Robinson said. "Also, I know of no veterinarian in the area who would let a client pay the money out of a period of time if they could afford surgical fees."

"Education of an irresponsible public is the key element of a solution," Riggs emphasized. "Owners must be convinced that animal control programs are for the benefit of people as well as pets."



Battalion photo by Jerry...

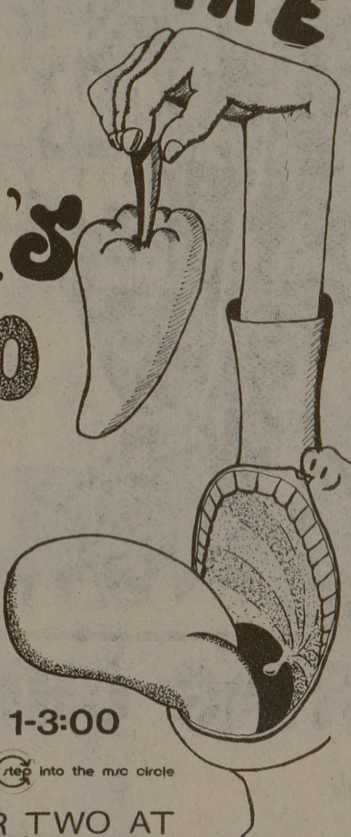
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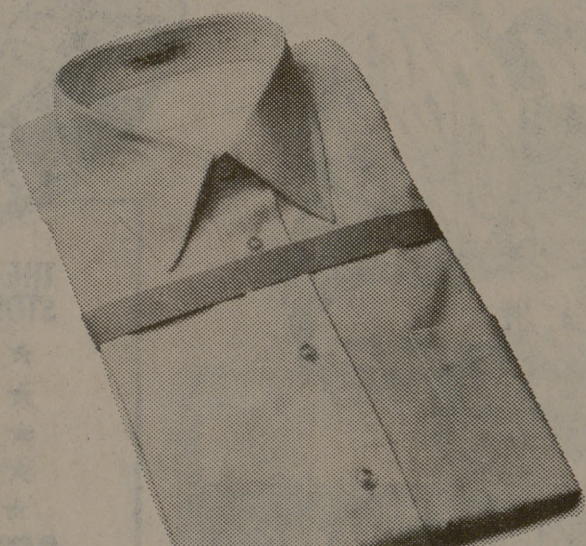
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