

The Problem of Animal Hoarding

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The Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium (HARC) was formed in 1997 to investigate the problem of animal hoarding from an interdisciplinary perspective. Members include Dr. Arnold Arluke, Northeastern University, Boston, MA; Dr. Randy Frost, Smith College, Northampton, MA; Mr. Carter Luke, Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, Boston, MA; Dr. Ed Messner, Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, MA; Ms. Jane Nathanson, LCSW, LRC, CRC, Boston, MA, and Dr. Gail Steketee, Boston University, Boston, MA.

Animal hoarding, sometimes referred to as “collecting,” is a problem that probably exists in every community.¹ In a typical case, a person is discovered living in squalid conditions with dozens to over a hundred animals, both dead and alive. Cats and dogs are the most commonly hoarded species, but wildlife, dangerous exotic animals, and farm animals have been involved, even in urban situations. Such animals are frequently ill and malnourished to the point of starvation. Floors may buckle from being soaked with urine and feces, and the air may be difficult for investigators to breathe without protective apparatus.

Hoarding cases are procedurally cumbersome, time consuming, and costly to resolve. They can overlap or fall between the jurisdictional cracks of numerous state and local government agencies (e.g., mental health, public health, zoning, building safety, animal control, aging, sanitation, fish and wildlife, and child welfare agencies). Resolution is further confounded by difficult issues of personal freedom, lifestyle choice, mental competency, and private property rights. In one famous case, a woman living in a school bus with 115 dogs had been investigated in several jurisdictions in four states.² In each case, she had essentially been given a tank of gas and been told to get out of town. When finally prosecuted in Oregon, she went through three prosecutors and six judges, finally serving as her own attorney. Her trial lasted five weeks.

Characteristics of Animal Hoarders

In 1997, an interdisciplinary study group, the Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium (HARC), was established in Massachusetts to study the problem of hoarding and to increase awareness of the problem among mental health and social service professionals and municipal officials. HARC has defined an animal hoarder as someone who has:

- accumulated a large number of animals, which has overwhelmed that person’s ability to provide even minimal standards of nutrition, sanitation, and veterinary care;
- failed to acknowledge the deteriorating condition of the animals (including disease, starvation, and even death) and the household environment (severe overcrowding, very unsanitary conditions); and
- failed to recognize the negative effect of the collection on his or her own health and well-being, and on that of other household members.³

Although the stereotypical profile of a hoarder is an older, single female, living alone and known as the neighborhood “cat lady,” in reality this behavior seems to cross all demographic and socioeconomic boundaries. As hoarders tend to be very secretive, many can lead a double life with a successful professional career - hoarding behavior has been discovered among doctors, nurses, public officials, college professors, and veterinarians, as well as among a broad spectrum of socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals.

The paradox that confounds resolution of these cases is that hoarders often profess great love for animals. A hoarder may claim to be a pet rescuer or a “no-kill” shelter attempting to help unwanted pets, and some may be professional or hobby animal breeders. All too frequently, these excuses may be used as effective ploys for the media or as defenses in court. Yet despite these claims of professionalism and good intentions, hoarders are by definition oblivious to the extreme suffering, obvious to the casual observer, of their animals. When animals are rescued from these situations, euthanasia is often the only practical recourse because of the extent of the animals’ illnesses, poor condition, and lack of socialization.

These are cases no one wants to handle, and it is not uncommon for them to be sidestepped until the situation has deteriorated to the point it cannot be ignored. By that time, expenses for veterinary care, housing of animals, litigation, and clean-up or demolition of premises can run into the tens of thousands of dollars. Procrastination also may increase the likelihood that the resolution will garner media attention. Greater recognition of this syndrome, as well as improved understanding of standards for responsible animal sheltering and rescue are needed.

Roots of the Behavior

Animal hoarding is not yet recognized as indicative of any specific psychological disorder. However, evidence from case reports indicates that eventually, many hoarders are placed under guardianship or other supervised living situations, suggesting the incapacity to make rational decisions and manage their affairs.⁴ This may well indicate a strong mental health component. Perhaps the most prominent psychological feature of these individuals is that pets (and other possessions) become central to the hoarder's core identity. The hoarder develops a strong need for control, and just the thought of losing an animal can produce an intense grief-like reaction. Preliminary HARC interviews also suggest that hoarders grew up in chaotic households, with inconsistent parenting, in which animals may have been the only stable feature.⁵

In a recent monograph, HARC outlined possible psychological models for animal hoarding.⁶ One argument is that a focal delusional disorder could be present, since claims that animals are healthy and well-cared for, in the face of clear evidence to the contrary, and delusional levels of paranoia about officials, are consistent with a belief system that is out of touch with reality. Similarities have been noted between hoarders and substance abusers, others with impulse control problems, or compulsive gamblers. An attachment disorder could also be present, such that relationships with animals are preferred because they are safer and less threatening than relationships with people.

Perhaps the most parsimonious explanation is obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). Hoarding of inanimate objects is seen in a variety of psychological disorders, but is most commonly seen in OCD. Two to three percent of the human population suffers from OCD, and 15 to 30 percent of those have hoarding as a primary symptom.⁷ It is unknown what proportion of these individuals hoard animals.

Humans at Risk

For most hoarders, living spaces are often compromised to the extent that they no longer serve the function for which they were intended. Appliances and basic utilities (heat, plumbing, and electricity) are frequently inoperative. Household functioning is often so impaired that both food preparation and maintaining basic sanitation are impossible. However, few hoarders seem to meet the criteria for mental incompetence or immediate danger to the community, so options for intervention are limited.

In many animal hoarding situations, other family members, like minor children, dependent elderly persons, or disabled adults, are present and are also victims of this behavior. Serious unmet human health needs are commonly observed, and the conditions often meet the criteria for adult self-neglect, child neglect, or elder abuse. From a community health perspective, the clutter can pose a fire hazard. In some cases, fireplaces and kerosene heaters are used for heat. Rodent and insect infestations, as well as odors, can create a neighborhood nuisance. These are important public health aspects of animal hoarding that go largely unrecognized, and which may provide avenues for intervention. In one hoarding case, the air ammonia level after the house had been ventilated by the fire department was 152 ppm; the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health lists 300 ppm as a concentration immediately dangerous to life or health, and 25 ppm as the maximum average occupational exposure during the workday.⁸

It seems ironic that while the medico-legal framework for intervention to help people in these situations seems to be inadequate, there are comparatively effective and easily implemented laws in place to allow us to rescue the animal victims.

Concerns with Prosecution

Every state has statutes that mandate that caretakers provide animals with sufficient food and water, a sanitary environment, and necessary veterinary care in case of illness or injury. Therefore, hoarding cases are often initially investigated and handled by representatives of the local animal shelter, humane society, or other animal protection group. In cases where an animal protection organization does not have jurisdiction, local police officers or municipal animal control officers may be the initial agents to investigate a case. Because of the severity of animal suffering and need for expediency, a common scenario would be for the

animals to be removed for their own protection through use of a search warrant, with the hoarder subsequently prosecuted under state anti-cruelty laws. Unless relinquishment can be negotiated, the animals must be held as evidence until the case is concluded.

Penalties

In some jurisdictions, violations of animal cruelty statutes may be summary offenses prosecuted by local humane agents or animal control officers in front of a magistrate, whereas in others, they may be misdemeanors, or in some cases, felonies, requiring prosecution by the district attorney's office. Penalties in the event of a guilty finding can range from a nominal fine to forfeiture of the animals and jail time. Some states mandate psychological counseling of offenders,¹ whereas others make it an option for the court.² Some state statutes provide for the recovery of the costs of boarding and medical care for animals in cruelty cases.³ Occasionally, there may be prohibitions on future pet ownership, or limitations imposed on the number of animals, along with a requirement of periodic monitoring of the situation by authorities. Supervised probation has been recommended over court probation as a better way to ensure compliance.

Prohibitions against future pet ownership are effective only to the extent that monitoring is practical. Recidivism is rapid and may be almost universal. In a typical example, two 50 year-old women and their 73 year-old mother were discovered living with 82 live, and 108 dead, cats. They fled from the investigation, rented a new apartment nearby, and had seven cats and a dog two days later.⁴ Even when monitoring is practical, hoarders can escape enforcement by moving to a new jurisdiction, often only across town or county lines.

Pet Limitation Ordinances

Some communities attempt to either prevent or remedy hoarding situations by passing ordinances that limit the number of pets a person can own. There is no data to indicate whether these measures are effective, but what is known is that they are wildly unpopular, difficult to enforce, and likely to be opposed by a broad coalition of pet fanciers, breeders, rescue groups, and animal protection organizations. This is a harsh and probably ineffective remedy that needlessly penalizes responsible pet owners.

Animal Shelter or Kennel Regulations

The worst situations may be avoided through regulations that stipulate housing densities, sanitation re-

quirements, veterinary care, and which provide for regular inspections of licensed facilities. For example, Colorado has developed licensing requirements and comprehensive standards for the operation of an animal shelter or pet rescue organization.⁵ Such criteria could also help the media and the public, as well as the courts, to distinguish between legitimate sheltering efforts and hoarding.

Animal Neglect - A Sentinel for Family Members at Risk

Since companion animals share our lives so intimately, it is becoming increasingly recognized that animal abuse or neglect is just one more manifestation of a larger societal problem in which vulnerable family members become victims of violence or other forms of abuse. Two recent texts clearly established the link between animal abuse and child abuse, as well as domestic violence.⁶

Consequently, an increasing number of animal welfare agencies and child protection groups are recognizing the value of cross-reporting abuse and cross-training their personnel.

California mandates that animal control personnel report child abuse; Connecticut and the District of Columbia encourage it.⁷ Ohio law provides for humane officers to take possession of children at risk,⁸ and a new bill would mandate it in Virginia.⁹ In Illinois, veterinarians are among the mandated reporters of elder abuse.¹⁰ Shelters for battered women are beginning to implement programs to provide a safe haven for pets as an incentive to facilitate a woman's escape from an abusive partner.¹¹ However, there is less awareness that neglected animals may also serve as a sentinel for adult self-neglect or elder abuse.

Benefits of a Task Force

Cooperation of a broad spectrum of municipal agencies and social service organizations can optimize the resolution of hoarding cases. In this way, the problem can be attacked on all fronts and with greater leverage. One key to success is the inclusion of an experienced and skilled animal welfare agency, able to recognize cases where prosecution is optimal, as opposed to those in which a strategy of negotiation and building trust can lead to the gradual reduction of animal populations and an improvement in household conditions. Other desirable members of such a task force would include representatives from animal control, public health and mental health agencies, child welfare and adult protective services, zoning and fire prevention officials, and veterinarians. Thirty-

nine states and many municipalities have public health veterinarians who are uniquely qualified to consult on these cases and help coordinate joint efforts.¹²

Management Recommendations

HARC maintains a web site with reference material, including links to psychological literature and newspaper reports.¹³ The Humane Society of the United States also consults on management of hoarding cases.¹⁴ HARC recently released these preliminary case management recommendations:

- Many people have difficulty feeling sympathy or even respect toward hoarders. By maintaining an awareness of their own emotional responses, the individuals attempting to intervene are likely to find it easier to retain perspective.
- Do not assume a mental health problem is present. Since the problem of animal hoarding is a very new area of study, it is unlikely that mental health services that specialize in intervention with animal hoarders will be available. It may be useful to refer the hoarder to a clinician with extensive experience in assessing and diagnosing people with a wide range of mental health problems.
- Encouraging the hoarder to seek medical attention might be appropriate. In view of hoarders' financial problems, the hoarder might need social service help to obtain adequate medical services.
- Much of the hoarder's identity may be tied to his or her possessions; therefore, giving up anything can be associated with tremendous fear, apprehension, and even a grief-like reaction. If possible, avoid any discussion of reduction in number initially, as this will likely evoke strong resistance from the hoarder and be a barrier to future communication. Slow reductions in the number of animals may be much more palatable and lead to greater cooperation.
- Hoarders often firmly believe they are providing quality care and have special empathy with the animals. It may be helpful to acknowledge their attempts to provide care, however unsuccessful, and their special connection with the animals, so as to gain their confidence and trust. Their caregiving may be a conduit to communication.

- Expect denial of the problem on the part of the hoarder. There is probably little point in arguing about what may appear to be a serious lapse in care, or insensitivity to obvious suffering. Hoarders are often not lying; they lack the insight to appreciate the true conditions present.
- Hoarders often view the world as a very hostile place for both animals and people. This, coupled with the role the animals play in their lives, will make them doubly suspicious about the motives of those seeking to help. Carefully consider your approach. Avoid badges or other official paraphernalia if possible. It may be helpful to identify a friend, neighbor, family member, or possibly a veterinarian, to intercede or act as an intermediary.
- Instead of arguing about the household conditions, consider analyzing function - what the individual cannot do because of the hoarding. For example, are they having trouble cooking, or affording pet food, or sleeping? Working on these issues could be a conduit to trust and better communication that will let you indirectly work on the animal hoarding problem.
- Hoarders may have problems concentrating and staying on track with any management plan. Be prepared for a long term process and frequent monitoring of the situation.
- Treat each hoarding case as unique. Avoid a "one-size-fits-all" protocol which can jeopardize the sensitivity to the individual needs of each case.¹⁵

Notes

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17. H.B. 2256, 2001 Reg. Sess. (Va. 2001).

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