



Centre for Companion Animal Health

Director: Professor Jacque Rand, BVSc, DVSc, MACVS, DipACVIM (Int Med)

Identification of key factors that influence entry of dogs into animal shelters, and shelter and dog factors associated with risk of euthanasia

Making a Difference to the Health and Welfare of our Pets

Executive Summary

Professor Jacque Rand BVSc, DVSc, MACVS, DipACVIM (Int Med) is Director of the Centre for Companion Animal Health at The University of Queensland and has 20 years of research experience and an international reputation in veterinary science. Her research has changed the management of feline disease around the world and she brings this experience to enhancing the outcomes of research projects conducted through the Centre for Companion Animal Health.

The University of Queensland's Centre for Companion Animal Health (CAH) is committed to improving the health and welfare of companion animals, and enriching the lives of pets, their owners and our communities. The Centre stands for profound respect for animal life and research excellence, and its work is recognised both nationally and internationally. In partnership with individuals, industry, animal welfare organisations and government, the Centre undertakes targeted research in three key areas.

Companion Animal Health: Improving the health of companion animals through a better understanding of the causes of disease and the development of better treatments.

Human-Animal Bond: Enriching human-animal relationships for the benefit of animals and society through identifying ways companion animals can best assist the disadvantaged, disabled, sick, elderly, and children.

Unwanted Pets: Providing society with evidence-based solutions to prevent unwanted and problem pets.

The Centre is seeking funding for the following research project:

Identification of key factors that influence entry of dogs into animal shelters, and shelter and dog factors associated with risk of euthanasia.

Research Project Details

Unwanted Pets Projects/Shelter Medicine

Identification of key factors that influence entry of dogs into animal shelters, and shelter and dog factors associated with risk of euthanasia.

In USA and Australia, more dogs die from euthanasia each year than disease, accidents or old age. An estimated 25-40% of dogs that enter shelters are euthanized each year across USA and Australia. In Australia, there has been little reduction in the number of unwanted dogs being euthanized in the last 7-10 years, although the percentage rehomed and reclaimed is increasing. Past and current strategies to manage this appalling issue have had limited success. No comprehensive nation-wide data on unwanted dogs entering shelters have ever been collected and analysed. It is essential to first understand the problem, before effective strategies can be implemented. This problem of unwanted pets negatively impacts the community financially because animal management services, including managing unwanted and homeless pets cost \$250 million per year annually in Australia and \$5 billion in USA. It also impacts the community emotionally because the stress for veterinary, nursing and shelter staff affects 50 % of animal workers who show symptoms of compassion fatigue (post-traumatic stress) including headaches, sleeplessness and depression. Euthanasia as a management strategy does not decrease the overpopulation of pets, so alternate solutions need to be found.

This project will undertake the first comprehensive nation-wide study in Australia or USA to understand the problem of unwanted and homeless dogs that enter shelters. Specifically we will determine where dogs entering shelters across Australia are coming from, factors influencing their entry into shelters, and then identify dog and shelter factors that increase their probability of being euthanized. Understanding the unwanted dog problem will ultimately lead to effective solutions that reduce the euthanasia of healthy dogs.

Outcomes of this research are that by understanding the problem, it will provide valuable information for the development of evidence-based nationwide strategies for shelters and government in Australia and USA. This project will form the basis for effecting policy and societal change directed at reducing the number of dogs euthanized after entering a shelter.

Decreasing euthanasia rates will assist in decreasing the incidence of compassion fatigue and work stress amongst shelter staff. Reduced influx of dogs into shelters will decrease government animal management costs and provide funds for positive companion animal initiatives and community education. This project is working towards a future where healthy dogs are no longer euthanized merely because there are not enough homes or because owners do not have the knowledge to treat their pet's behaviour problems.

The aim is to identify factors that will enable implementation of evidence-based strategies at the shelter, community and government level to decrease dog euthanasia.

- **Working with government** to develop informed codes of practice and legislation for both shelters and communities
- **Working with shelters** to implement evidence-based best practice aimed at reducing the numbers of dogs entering shelters and improving the success of re-homing programs, and
- **Working with the community** to promote awareness, educate and involve communities in evidence-based solutions to the global problem of the unwanted dog population

This project is expected to yield far-reaching outcomes for shelters and dog welfare in the western world, especially in Australia, U.K. and the U.S.