Should We De-Sex All Of Our Pets?

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The ethics of neutering companion animals gets complicated.

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In 1867, the streets of New York were awash with homeless dogs. The city council took action. Stray dogs were to be impounded and drowned en masse via a device dubbed “the canine bath tub.” The “tub” was an iron crate seven feet long, four feet high, and five feet across. Forty-eight dogs at a time were jammed into the heavy cage. It was then lifted up by a crane, swung over the East River and submerged. Ten minutes later, the cage was hauled to the surface, the carcasses removed, and the cage reloaded with another batch of strays. Dog catchers could kill 750 animals in a seven hour shift.

The Good News: There Are Fewer Unwanted Pets

Today, euthanasia techniques are more humane. (See the discussion of “the blue needle” in PT blogger Jessica Pierce’s wonderful new book on the aging and death of pets). And the number of unwanted dogs and cats killed in animal “shelters” dropped from 24 million in 1970 to about 4 million in 2007. There are a couple of reasons for this dramatic decline. One is that animal protection organizations succeeded in convincing Americans that adopting a shelter dog is morally preferable to purchasing a purebred puppy. (This trend has devastated the American Kennel Club. AKC puppy registrations plummeted from one and a half million in 1992 to less than 600,000 in 2010.)

An equally important reason for the decrease in unwanted pets is the success of the spay and neuter movement. Due to the efforts of animal protection organizations, a large majority of dogs and cats in the United States are now “neutered.” (This practice is more accurately referred to as “desexing” in some countries.) Indeed, responsible pet ownership is now equated with having your companion animal’s testicles or ovaries removed, and in some communities it is illegal to allow a dog to reproduce without a special permit.

Given the benefits of having fewer homeless dogs and cats, it would seem that desexing our pets is a no brainer. However, last summer at the meeting of the International Society for Anthrozoology, the animal behaviorist/veterinarian Ben Hart told me about some research he was working on that muddies the ethical waters on the spay and neuter issue. Ben has a penchant for spinning my head around. This time, he swore me to secrecy until the results were published….which happened last week.

The Bad News: Neutering Can Be Bad For Your Pet’s Health

A research team from the University of California at Davis (including Ben and his wife Lynette Hart) examined the records of 759 golden retrievers seen at the UC-Davis veterinary hospital
between 2000 and 2009. (They focused on goldens because of the breed’s popularity and their propensity for cancer and bone and joint disorders.) Here is a summary of the results. (Note that “early-neutered” animals were desexed before they were one year old.)

**Hip dysplasia** -- twice as common in early-neutered males as intact males. No effect on females.

**Knee ligament damage** – higher incidence in early-neutered males and females.

**Lymphatic cancer** – three times more common in early neutered males than intact males. No effect in females.

**Cancer of blood vessel walls** – four times more common in late-neutered than intact females. No effect in males.

**Mast cell tumors** – significantly more common in late-neutered females. No effect in males.

In short, the researchers concluded that early and/or late neutering increased the risks of all five diseases in golden retrievers. Their study was restricted to one breed, but other studies have also reported deleterious consequences of desexing healthy dogs. For example, castrated elderly male dogs are at greater risk for canine dementia. And another recent study found that neutering increased aggression problems in female dogs.

As you might expect, the relative health costs and benefits of routine neutering on the health of individual animals have become a topic of controversy. For example, the American Veterinary Medical Association’s brochure on spay and neuter omits any mention of the negative effects of desexing pets. Yet several recent reviews of the impact of neutering on dogs concluded that the negative health effects may well outweigh the positive effects. Indeed, after reviewing dozens of research articles on desexing pets, a research team headed by Clare Palmer of Texas A and M wrote, “Our overall conclusion is that routine neutering of companion animals, and notably male dogs, is not morally justified.” Ouch.

**The Moral Dilemma**

No one wants to go back to the days when 24 million unwanted cats and dogs got the blue needle each year. But here is the ethical quandry. While neutering reduces suffering in general, it may well put your individual pet at greater risk of a serious disease such as cancer. It’s a classic conflict between what is best for the individual versus what is best for society.

Is there an alternative to routine desexing of pets? Perhaps. While the American ideal of near universal neuter seems to be spreading, Europeans are less inclined to desex their pets. This is particularly true in Scandinavia. In Sweden, fewer than 7% of female dogs and even fewer males are neutered. Indeed, until 1988, it was illegal for Swedes to remove the reproductive organs of their dogs and cats unless medically indicated. Stine Christiansen, a Danish anthrozoologist and veterinarian, told me that when dogs are neutered in her country, it is nearly always for medical or behavioral reasons rather population control. She says that there is no pet overpopulation problem in Denmark because people simply do not let their pets run loose. The
same is true in Norway, where, with a few exceptions, it is presently illegal to desex healthy
dogs.

I mentioned the UC Davis paper on golden retrievers to Jane Finneran, a highly regarded dog
trainer. Jane was not keen on the idea that dog owners who don’t let their animals run loose
would do better to not neuter their pets. “Far more puppies are killed in shelters from the "oops"
than any number of golden retrievers who will die from cancer!” she told me. On the other hand,
when I posted the golden retriever study on Facebook, the always insightful PT blogger Gad
Saad, commented, “I have always felt very conflicted and uneasy about “playing God” with our
companion’s reproductive destiny.”

I expect Jane is right. But in light of the UC-Davis study and similar findings by other
researchers on the health effects of neutering companion animals, I am now troubled by my
unquestioning enthusiasm for plucking the gonads from every dog and cat in America.

Post Script: After this blog was published Ben sent me this e-mail. "Hal, a possible solution is
vasectomy for male dogs and tubal ligation for females. These operations are much less
expensive and less traumatic for the dogs. The weird thing is we don't teach these simple
operations yet in vet schools, but shelter vets could learn it in an afternoon wet lab."