

Stalking the Spay/Neuter Standard

By Patty Khuly, DVM

In case you hadn't noticed, the notion of the obligatory spay and neuter of 6-month-old pets is seriously at risk in the U.S. New veterinary research is inexorably chipping away at the 30-plus-year-old concept of peripuberal sterilization as the standard for idealized patient care.

That's not to say that prepuberal castration and ovariectomization of all pets isn't desirable from a public policy standpoint—indeed, that may well remain the case everlastingly, despite the research.

What's in question is not the minimum standard of care (which still allows for the recommendation of spays and neuters at 6 months), but the optimum approach to individualized care.

As veterinary medicine reaches for excellence in that highly profitable sector serving beloved pets whose owners expect the epitome of individualized care, the 6-month spay and neuter may well go the way of IV dexamethasone for cardiovascular shock—as in, it's probably no longer considered a good idea.

Granted, we don't yet know the outcome of research into the model timing of spays and neuters, but if the large retrospective study out this past spring (JAVMA, May 15) is any guide, we'll see more research in this vein for years to come.

In this study, an increased incidence of cruciate ligament disease and severity of hip dysplasia were tied to spay and neuter status—negatively.

Owners elect for it with the innocence of lambs led to slaughter.

But God, how I love my spays and neuters. Not only do these bread-and-butter procedures lubricate my paycheck with minimal angst, they actually serve to decrease my overall stress level.

After all, there's nothing like a spay or neuter to grace my day with the righteous sense of a virtuous goal achieved.

Owners elect for it with the innocence of lambs led to slaughter, knowing, through a collective cultural mechanism we currently call “enlightened ownership” that this is what's best for their pet.

And we, comfortable with their ovine acquiescence, plow on with self-satisfied intent, enjoying each tear of ovarian ligament and each snap of tunical attachment with the glee of a child with reams of bubble wrap.

Gotta love the spay and neuter. And its corollary? Gotta despise the “crazy” breeder or “over-educated” pet owner whose cursory perusal of Internet resources yields an abundance of material questioning the automatic requirement in favor of sterilization: urinary incontinence, mammary neoplasia, prostatic disease and osteosarcomas.

Now we have to add in cruciates and hip dysplasia? What's next? Longevity? Happiness?

“God, I hate the Internet!” you say. “I actually have to defend my approach to medicine—on the issue of basic spays and neuters, even!”

This makes it seem as if all our pedestals and laurels have been quashed at the mere mention of our recommendation in favor of pet population control.

But most of you would do well to sit up and take note of the revolution in high-end pet care that lends our clients the audacity to challenge the way we've always done things. In some cases it even means that our clients know which way the wind blows, even before we do.

And what does that mean for us? That attention to research, cultural norms and pop culture can trump our bubble-wrap dreams of early-and-often spays and neuters into perpetuity. <HOME>

Patty Khuly, DVM, blogs regularly at www.dolittler.com.