

# Dogs in rescue shelters: a fate worse than death?

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## Introduction

Surrendering a dog to a rescue shelter is a seemingly more agreeable decision than having it euthanased. In America millions of dogs enter shelters each year (Hennessey et al, 2002). It is now understood that keeping a social, inquisitive species in a bland environment results in abnormal behaviours indicative of compromised welfare. This paper addresses recent scientific developments that may enhance the welfare of dogs in shelters and discusses the practicalities of their implementation.

## Discussion

Although most dog shelters meet an animal's basic need for food and shelter, frustration and fear are undoubtedly a part of a dog's experience there. Lack of choice and the inability to satisfy desires to socialise, mate and play may mount into "learned helplessness" - the inability of an individual to cope with lack of control over its environment (Wells et al, 2002a).

One method of ameliorating the social restriction and stress of sheltered dogs is to increase human interaction. Hennessey et al (2002) found that handling for twenty minutes a day, five days a week for eight weeks moderated the activity of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis in sheltered dogs (n=20) exposed to novel situations. In contrast, twenty dogs without increased human interaction had nearly double the plasma cortisol increase, suggesting sensitisation to stressful stimuli over time. The same study found that if dogs were fed a premium quality diet, plasma adrenocorticotrophic hormone secretion decreased over the eight-week period. Whilst feeding a premium diet in a shelter with one hundred dogs may be cost-prohibitive, a program of human interaction could be extremely valuable and relatively inexpensive. Dogs could be trained to obey basic commands each day during interactive sessions, not only reducing cortisol levels (and therefore stress) but also providing stimulation. This could help to prevent behavioural problems after adoption, and reduce the number of dogs returned to the shelter, greatly improving long-term welfare. A larger scale experiment would be useful in determining the strength of this finding, given the small number of animals involved and the restriction to one shelter setting.

Whilst improving the short-term welfare of sheltered dogs is certainly important, it is of no value if the animal is sheltered indefinitely. Wells et al (2002a) found that dogs which had been in a shelter for more than five years were less active and tended to spend more time at the back of their kennel, away from public view. In contrast, dogs which had spent less than six months in a shelter interacted with their environment more frequently, and spent longer standing alert at the front of their kennel. An extended period of time spent resting suggests frustration and apathy. In addition, animals that display this behaviour are more difficult to re-home, as they are not publicly appealing. Thus, length of time spent in a rescue shelter has a negative impact on dog behaviour as well as compromising long-term welfare.

Another simple method of enhancing the welfare of sheltered dogs is auditory enrichment. Wells et al (2002b) found that different forms of auditory stimulation affect dogs' activity. Heavy metal music promoted barking, whilst classical music resulted in more time spent resting. This suggests that, as in humans, classical music has a calming effect on dogs. However, this study does not truly explore the scope of auditory stimulation as a tool for enriching a dog's environment. It is bordering on anthropomorphism to suggest that dogs find music of any consequence at all. It would be interesting to examine the effects of other types of auditory stimulation on dogs in rescue shelters, and discover what is genuinely stimulating or relaxing to them. Regardless of the effect on dogs, we know that classical music relaxes humans, so playing it in rescue shelters may serve to encourage visitors to stay longer and put them in a positive frame of mind whilst choosing their new pet.

Wells et al (2000a) established that the public finds alert, quiet dogs at the front of their pen with an enriched environment more likable than their counterparts. This study found that, by adding a bed and toy to the front of the cage and augmenting social interaction with people, the incidence of dog purchase increased significantly.

Yet, what happens to these dogs after adoption? Wells et al (2000b) found that out of five hundred and fifty-six people surveyed after adoption of a dog from a shelter, 68.3% reported their new pet had a behaviour problem. Undesirable behaviours such as fearfulness, destructiveness, coprophagy, barking and aggression resulted in thirty-six people surveyed returning their dogs to the shelter.

It is possible that plasma cortisol measures of dogs in shelters could be used to predict their post-adoption behaviour. Hennessey et al (2001) found that puppies with lower plasma cortisol levels two weeks after entering the shelter were more likely to have behavioural problems six months after adoption. Although it is fascinating to find a potential determinant of unwanted behaviour in puppies, it is perhaps more poignant to seek its cause. The effects of lack of stimulation and socialization, and reduced exposure to humans at a critical age may be more worthy of investigation.

Whilst premium diets and plasma cortisol measures for every dog may be expensive and impractical, twenty minutes of human interaction per day, a chew toy and auditory stimulation are not. It is with these tools that we can improve the short-term welfare of dogs in rescue shelters, with a view to sustaining their future.

## Conclusion

Recent studies have shown that simple, inexpensive alterations to the shelter environment e.g. toys, auditory stimulation and increased human interaction may improve the welfare of dogs. The question remains whether potentially prolonged social and spatial restrictions are truly alleviated by such interventions. Regardless of possible improvements to short-term welfare, it is our responsibility to consider the ethics of depriving animals of their natural state of living and to recognise that no amount of environmental enrichment can replace a loving home. Therefore, it is not only scientific development that is necessary to improve the long-term welfare of sheltered dogs, but also behavioural development which influences the chances of these animals being relinquished in the first place.

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