

Thoughts on the Oregon Legislature Weighing In on Surgical Declawing of Cats

As I write this, the Oregon State Senate Human Services and Early Childhood committee is convening a hearing over House Bill 3494A. This bill was already passed in the house and will likely be up for a vote by the Senate. This bill prohibits declawing or devocalizing of animals unless the procedure is performed by licensed veterinarian under certain conditions. The conditions however, are broad and subjective and many object to the current bill's wording, feeling it allows for too many situations where debarking or declawing will still be allowed. As such, an amendment was proposed to narrow the bill to allow these procedures only in cases where they are medically necessary to treat or relieve an illness, disease or injury or to correct a congenital abnormality that is causing or will cause the animal physical harm or pain.

This got me thinking about two questions. 1. Where does the act of declawing fit into today's society and is this still acceptable given the risks and benefits to the cat and the human? 2. What is the role of government versus the veterinarian in these matters?

We know the choice to declaw a cat is usually made for behavioral concerns including destruction of property or due to concerns over the risk of injury to humans or risk of spreading disease to immune-compromised or sick individuals. I had these concerns in mind when I was in veterinary school, early first term, in my first year of classes. We were asked by our professor to place ourselves in one of two groups, either against declawing cats under any circumstance or in favor of declawing in cats only if the alternative is that the owner will relinquish the cat due to destructive behavior. As a prior CPA and not having been long in the veterinary field, I was sort of shocked to learn about the process of declawing cats. It seemed a bit horrific once I learned what the procedure actually involved. It was not just cutting or removing the nail, but actually amputating the last bone of each of a cat's front toes. However, when faced with the hypothetical choice of a cat going to the shelter and being relinquished by an otherwise loving family, versus declawing the cat and allowing them to stay with their family, I decided that the latter group was where I stood on this issue. When I was out of vet school, I continued to use this as my guide as to whether or not to perform the declaw procedure in cats in practice.

I have performed 5 of these procedures at clinics at which I have worked. Every time with sterile surgical practices, anesthesia, local anesthetic blocks and good pain control before, during and after, including getting up in the middle of the night to check on these patients post procedure and administer pain medications. I saw these cats go home comfortable and saw them back months later for wellness care. They seemed to be doing great, and owners were happy. This is why I felt, and many of us feel, the procedure is acceptable, right? We trade short-term discomfort for a lifetime of happy cats and owners, feeling the trade off was worth the risk. We just saved them from possibly going to the shelter. We are heroes.

Risk to Cats and Humans

Today, the problem with the theory of declawing cats causing short-term pain for a lifetime of happy cats and owners, is that we now know a lot more about cat behavior and actual risks to both cats *and humans* with performing this procedure. The obvious medical risk, whether this procedure is done correctly and with care, with a laser or with a blade, is that the short-term

discomfort is not really short-term at all. There is the risk of long-term neuropathic pain to the cat. These cats may walk around showing obvious signs such as shaking paws or limping, or it may be subtler given cats' propensity to hide pain. Based on some of the work The Paw Project has done, and given some of their case studies, there certainly are some cats post declaw that have significant neuropathic pain. Not only can there be physical pain though, there is a behavioral discomfort component for cats post-procedure as well. There is an argument that by declawing cats, we are taking away one of the most innate and ingrained behaviors a cat ever expresses - scratching. They scratch to mark territory, for exercise, to defend themselves and for pleasure. Taking away their ability to do this can cause a lifetime of anxiety. Some resources have shown that cat behavior can often get *worse* after a surgical declaw procedure, with cats more likely to resort to biting behaviors and exhibiting litter-box aversion. Whether these behaviors are due to unrecognized physical discomfort in these cats or anxiety at no longer being able to express innate behaviors is unclear. Perhaps both are possible causes. What is clear is that disease transmission from a cat scratch is very unlikely, but much more likely from a cat bite.

Per Paul Koretz, Council Member of the 5th District of Los Angeles, who was involved in similar legislation that passed in his district, millions of cats end up in shelters due to behavioral problems allegedly *due to* their declaw procedures. Furthermore, he cites an April 2015 Bulletin from the Canadian Medical Association that specifically recommends against declawing as a prophylactic treatment for prevention of cat scratch fever in humans and goes on to state that the CDC and NIH have gone on record saying that they do not recommend declawing as prevention for spread of infectious disease to humans.

A final argument in favor of declawing is that without the ability to perform declaw procedures there will be cats that are relinquished to shelters, yet some resources show just the opposite as indicted by Mr. Koretz, above. Cats that have been declawed and that resort to biting behaviors instead, are more likely to be relinquished. In addition, per The Paw Project website, in 8 cities where legislation has been passed that bans declawing except for medical reasons, there has been no increase in the number of cats relinquished for scratching problems. In fact, in 2000, The Regional Shelter Relinquishment Survey (Shelter Survey) sponsored by the National Council on Pet Population Study and Policy (National Council) revealed that of the many cats relinquished for behavior reasons, one of the most common is litter box issues, scratching. Declawed cats are more likely to have such issues thus further increasing the likelihood of relinquishment.

Mitigating Destructive Behavior

Given what we now know more about cat behavior, and that the risk to cats and humans post declaw may be a lot worse than we thought prior, we may still ask the question that cats with claws can be destructive and what is to be done? Today there is so much information regarding alternatives to declawing and how to mitigate the risks of destruction of property with great resources such as articles by Dr. Sophia Yin that address this problem directly, to websites about enriching the environment for indoor cats such as "The Indoor Pet Initiative" website from Ohio State University, and even amazing local resources such as our very own board-certified behaviorist Dr. Chris Pachel. In addition, the use of scratching posts and products such as Soft Paws can be utilized. As Sharon Harmon, Executive Director for the Oregon Humane Society, stated in her testimony at the aforementioned hearing on House Bill 3494A, "Declawing and debarking are

surgical solutions for behavioral issues.” She goes on to say that “these surgeries involve significant risk and pain and are not always effective.”

So to repeat my first question “Where does the act of declawing fit into today’s society and is this still acceptable given the risks and benefits to the cat and the human?” If I were to answer this now, several years out of vet school and given my much greater understanding of cats, cat behavior and potential risks to both cats and humans, I would say that this procedure is no longer justified. We have alternatives, and in many cases may truly be doing more harm than good by performing the procedure. Whether you feel as strong as I do or not, I hope you will admit that these are very important points to consider and represent a paradigm shift in the way we now look at cats and declawing.

Role of Government in the Cat Declaw Argument

The second question I posted above is “What is the role in government versus the veterinarian in the matter of declawing?” Let’s start first by revisiting the bill, in general terms. House Bill 3494A proposes to have a statewide ban on declawing in cats (and debarking dogs) except under certain conditions. One such condition in the bill as currently written allows for declawing when “attempts to prevent the animal from destructively using its claws have failed”. There is an amendment to the bill being discussed that would restrict these exceptions to allow for declaw only to relieve an illness, disease or injury or due to a congenital abnormality. For those who do want legislation, all are in favor of banning the procedure in general, but the argument centers around amending the bill further to allow the procedure to be performed to strictly due to the medical reasons listed above.

Dr. Laura Cochrane, the recently appointed Oregon Director of The Paw Project , sent an email to many area veterinarians last week asking for those opposed to declawing in cats to also oppose HB 3494A as it is currently written, stating that there are too many “loopholes” in the bill that would essentially mean the ban does little to restrict declawing in cats in an effective way . In addition, Dr. Cochrane states that the bill, if passed as currently written without amendment, would actually be a major setback to all of the work The Paw Project has done to make declawing in cats illegal. They would be in support of this bill if an amendment was added that restricted the conditions to only allow declaw for injury, illness or disease or congenital abnormalities.

In opposition to this viewpoint, is the recent OVMA article that supports this bill as written, but is opposed to any amendments that make this bill more restrictive saying “we believe the amendment goes too far by leaving no allowance for extenuating circumstances” and “we also believe that any medical decisions about an animal should be left to the sound discretion of fully trained, licensed veterinarian.”

Can the veterinary profession simply regulate itself? Unfortunately, we cannot always rely on members of our profession to change with changing information. The fact that using pain medications with animal surgeries used to be elective and had to be legislated in Oregon, is one example of this. As pointed out in the recent OVMA article regarding this matter and referred to above, “Oregon Law requires that veterinarians provide multi-modal pain management.” This

statement is referring to all surgeries, of course, not just declaws, but the point is that at some point we had to legislate pain control in small animals for surgical procedures. This is a prime example of how, sometimes, we need to pass legislation to move the profession forward. Sometimes we just have to push.

So in answer to my second question as to what is the role of government in regulating the veterinary profession on these matters – I do believe government has a role to play in such matters as pain control in small animal surgeries and cat declawing procedures and no doubt many other issues that have come up in the past and will be brought forward in the future. Hopefully, all of these laws have been and will be passed with the expert guidance of veterinarians involved.

As a final summary statement, I do believe there is simply a moral argument that we as veterinarians, by declawing cats, are taking away one of their most innate and ingrained behaviors. We all believe in the human animal bond, and doing no harm. In an era where there is so much more information about cat behavior and the risks of cat declawing, and evidence that it truly can be harmful, life-long for these cats, I feel that change is needed. The declawing procedure should be banned. Furthermore, I believe legislation is needed to ban this procedure except on very narrow medical grounds, other than due to illness, injury or disease, or congenital defects. It is an antiquated procedure. As Mahatma Gandhi once said, “The greatness of a nation can be judged by the way its animals are treated.” Please let our veterinary profession, at least in Oregon, be a shining example of how we love our animals and our people and consider taking the initiative within our profession to ban on declawing cats in Oregon, whether legislated or not.