



International Veterinary Students' Association Policy Paper on Shelter Medicine:

The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) has estimated that there are more than 200 million stray dogs worldwide. In the United States alone, 7.6 million companion animals enter shelters every year. Many shelters face challenges due to inadequate management and funding, a lack of appropriate training of shelter staff and veterinarians, and overcrowding within the shelter. Because of this, many shelter animals have been receiving low standards of care and a poor quality of life (Turner, 2012). Furthermore, there is a lack of education worldwide on shelter medicine. Therefore, the International Veterinary Students' Association (IVSA) advocates for the increased opportunity for veterinary students to learn about shelter medicine within veterinary institutions worldwide.

Shelter medicine is a field of veterinary medicine that is dedicated to the care of stray and surrendered animals located in shelter facilities. This subject has recently emerged as a specialty field in which veterinarians can exercise their skills in order to promote a better quality of life for shelter animals. What is unique about the shelter medicine field is that it involves a wide array of expertise and requires competency in communication, education, surgical efficiency, triage and a strong understanding of a variety of animal behaviours. For example, shelter medicine incorporates efforts to decrease stray animal populations, improving management of living conditions and husbandry in animal shelters, surgical training and efficiency with regards to sterilization techniques, public education on a variety of companion animal-centered topics, and a broad awareness of anxiety, aggression, and fear-driven behaviours. We believe that to be a proficient veterinarian in shelter medicine, students should learn and practice this skill set within their educational curriculum.

The welfare of animals can be altered for the better by incorporating shelter medicine in the educational curriculum. Maddie's Fund, a leading foundation supporting shelter medicine, states that there continues to be a shortage of shelter animal veterinarians, due to the lack of training veterinary students receive in this subject. Because of this, millions of shelter animals continue to receive substandard or limited care, and many will suffer in poorly managed shelters.

IVSA recognises that an important part of solving the issue of poor shelter animal welfare includes building an effective curriculum within veterinary medicine. A shelter medicine program would enable students to be better prepared in solving not only local challenges with shelter animals, but also tackling global issues of poor animal welfare standards (Stevens, 2014). By incorporating a shelter medicine programme into the curriculum, students will gain a unique experience by making a tangible difference to the health and welfare of shelter animals, directly. Providing students with opportunities in shelter medicine will allow them to better understand and support local shelter organisations as they grow in their veterinary career regardless of if they pursue shelter medicine and become a shelter veterinarian as a career. Students involved in shelter medicine will also gain surgical proficiency in spay and neuter techniques, becoming efficient, rapid, and skilled surgeons. They will gain knowledge on behavioural modification and evaluation of companion animals, which is



essential to not only helping shelter animals find the perfect home, but will also be important for all veterinary clinical work in which the student may later be involved. Having these opportunities during their veterinary education will allow students to expand, grow, and improve these essential skills prior to graduating as a veterinarian (Stevens & Gruen 2014).

An article has already been published detailing a shelter medicine rotation program, titled "*Training Veterinary Students in Shelter Medicine: A Service-Learning Community-Classroom Technique*" (Stevens & Gruen 2014) that may provide assistance and guidance for implementing shelter medicine training within educational curriculum. Louisiana State University (LSU) and The Humane Society of the United States have commended this published work and showed strong support of the program (Wolfson et al 2015). This has inspired several shelter medicine student chapters to spawn across the continent. We hope institutions will follow these efforts of implementing shelter medicine within the educational curriculum, as there are still many veterinary institutions across the globe that are located in countries where shelter animal welfare is in dire need of veterinary support.

IVSA recommends that institutions should collaborate with the organisations stated below to create awareness and eventually develop a widely-available course on shelter medicine at the respective institutions as an elective course. This would contribute to the growth of the shelter medicine field globally, promote and support evidence-based techniques, and ultimately improve welfare for shelter animals.

References:

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*The **International Veterinary Students' Association (IVSA)** is a not-for-profit organization for veterinary students across the globe. The association was founded in 1953 in Germany and is voluntarily run by veterinary students since then. The mission of IVSA is to benefit the animals and people of the world, which is accomplished by promoting and enabling international application of veterinary skills, education and knowledge. IVSA has approximately 40.000 members, who study at one-hundred different universities in over fifty different countries, representing every continent of the world.*

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