

Rethinking cat declawing

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“Horrible, inhumane, and unnatural.” This is how Pamela Robinson, president and executive director of It’s All About the Animals Inc., a cat shelter in Rochester, describes the practice of cat declawing.

Jennifer Conrad, a veterinarian and founder and director of The Paw Project, said declawing is a misnomer for the surgery. Many people believe the procedure simply involves removing a nail, Conrad said, when in fact it requires amputating the entire first bone of a cat’s paw.

Conrad has been fighting declawing for nearly 20 years by educating the public and advocating for banning the practice. Given the serious complications cats can suffer because of declawing, she believes the surgery is one of the cruelest veterinary practices.

“As a vet, we all know that declawing is no good for cats,” Conrad said.

Animal rights activists and many veterinarians say a bill by Sen. Mark Montigny, D-New Bedford, that would outlaw declawing cats except in cases where it benefits the animal would be an effective solution to the problem.

“Declawing a cat is parallel to cutting off a human finger at its last joint,” said Montigny. “It is a cruel and potentially crippling procedure that provides zero benefit to the animal.”

The proposed legislation would impose increasing fines on anyone who “performs, or causes to be performed” the declawing of a cat. Those who violate the law could also be barred from owning or living with a cat.

The statute would still allow declawing in cases where it would be “therapeutic,” for instance if a paw was damaged or a bone grew a tumor. But Conrad, who supports Montigny’s bill, said that in these situations it would be unlikely that all knuckles would be removed.

The potential side effects of declawing are well-documented and numerous. According to the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), the physical side effects include acute and chronic pain, claw regrowth, improperly healed wounds, sudden loss of blood flow to the limbs, impaired immune response, and other serious complications.

Studies suggest that these complications go away for most cats after a few months or can be treated but some cats suffer from these problems for life or face serious further medical problems because of the surgery.

Just as worrying, experts say, are the behavioral side effects. Though veterinarians agree scratching is a normal, healthy behavior for cats, the AVMA reports that 20-40% of cats do not continue normal scratching behaviors after the procedure.

Studies show that declawed cats are more likely to bite which, opponents assert, is because cats are robbed of their primary mode of defense, so their only option is to bite.

Reports also suggest that declawed cats are more likely to urinate and defecate outside the litter box after being declawed. Opponents of the procedure believe this is because the surgery has caused digging in the litter box to be painful, thus

the cats avoid using it.

Despite the negative effects, declawing remains a common practice, with an AVMA-cited study suggesting that in some parts of the country some 20% of cats in the U.S. are declawed.

Kate Pietsch, a veterinarian and medical director of Anchor Animal Hospital in North Dartmouth, said the most common reason owners declaw their cat is because it is destructive in the house or because the animal is aggressive towards its owner.

But many veterinarians and shelters do not see these as justifiable reasons for removing part of a paw.

“As veterinarians, shouldn’t we be in the business of helping cats instead of protecting couches?” said Conrad.

So why are cats still being declawed?

Professionals agree many owners do not understand how bad declawing can be and that there are other options to addressing scratching.

“People think vets are looking out for their cats,” said Conrad. “So if they do it, then it must be OK.”

Pietsch agreed there are still a lot of misconceptions and misinformation about the procedure. She also acknowledged that some people may still wish to declaw, even with information about potential risks.

“In their minds, their concern for themselves or their furniture is more important than the cat’s medical concerns,” said Pietsch.

Edward Schettino, a veterinarian and Vice President of Animal Welfare and Veterinary Services at Animal Rescue League Boston, another organization supporting Montigny’s bill, said that some people are unwilling to train their cats to stop scratching.

“It takes effort and training to stop scratching,” said Schettino. “People will go above and beyond to train their dogs, but people think cats need no training. They think they just come into your house and use the litter box.”

Even more pressing is the question of why veterinarians, who are more likely to understand the risks, continue to perform the procedure. Conrad said there are a few “myths” that veterinarians tell themselves to justify declawing against their better judgment.

First, Conrad said, they believe that if they do not declaw the cat, the owner may disown the animal. Pietsch agreed, adding there is a saying among veterinarians: “better a home and no claws than claws and no home.”

But, said Conrad, declawing a cat for owners unwilling to put up with scratching is ineffective at keeping the cat in its home, because those animals are more likely to bite and urinate outside the litter box.

“If they’re intolerant of a cat scratching, how will they respond to increased biting and not using the litter box?” said Conrad.

Ruth Marshman, president of C.A.R.E. South Coast, an animal shelter in Acushnet, agreed that declawing does not stop abandonment. She wrote in an email that she currently has a cat that has been returned four times because of aggression caused by declawing.

Robinson said she takes in a large number of declawed cats surrendered because they frequently bite or urinate outside the litter box. Furthermore, she said, cats that are not adopted due to behavior problems may end up euthanized at another shelter.

The Canadian Veterinary Medical Association states that there are no studies showing cats with claws are relinquished at a higher rate than those without them.

“If declawing saved cats lives, I wouldn’t be working this hard to stop it,” said Conrad.

Aside from owners looking to protect their furniture, Conrad said some owners may declaw because they are immuno-compromised, adding that the solution doesn’t reflect the fact a bite is a more serious wound than a scratch, and declawed cats may bite more often.

Notably, the Center for Disease Control does not list declawing as a means of preventing disease in immune-compromised humans or otherwise.

Another reason a veterinarian may choose to declaw, Conrad said, may be because they believe that if they refuse, the owner will take the cat to another veterinarian who will not perform the surgery as well as they would, leading to more suffering for the cat.

“This is a fallacy,” said Conrad. “There’s no ‘right’ way to perform an unnecessary surgery that is not beneficial to the cat.”

Some veterinarians may declaw for less altruistic reasons. As the surgery is frequently offered as a part of a kitten or onboarding package or during a spay or neuter, veterinarians have a monetary incentive to declaw cats, said Conrad.

“It supersedes their paycheck,” said Conrad. “They use it as an add-on.”

Conrad added that though some younger veterinarians may not want to declaw, they may choose to do so because they are afraid of losing their position at a larger practice that continues the procedure.

Jerry Owens, a veterinarian and president of the American Veterinary Medical History Society, said that while he understands why some people are against declawing and acknowledges that the procedure can have serious complications, he believes it should not be outlawed.

“Saying you can’t declaw is like saying you can’t clip a dog’s ears or circumcise a baby,” said Owens.

Owens believes that if a surgeon performs the procedure correctly, there should be little to no complications or pain. He said he has had all of his cats declawed and feels no remorse about it.

“I did it to protect my furniture, sorry cat,” said Owens.

According to the Humane Society of the United States declawing in the U.S. and Canada most likely started in the 1950s. Experts hypothesize that it began with captive big cats in zoos as a means of escaping liability insurance, but started being offered as an option for household cats in the 1960s. By the 1970s, declawing was considered routine for indoor cats.

Much has changed in the past several decades. Some studies suggest that a newer procedure that allows veterinarians to declaw using a laser reduces pain. But many veterinarians are skeptical.

Regardless, while declawing was a standard practice during a spay or neuter 20-30 years ago, Pietsch said, it is now only performed if requested by the owner. She said that veterinarians have learned a lot more about how pain affects cat behavior in recent years, and this may have caused veterinarians to be more hesitant.

Awareness of how detrimental the procedure can be has also increased in recent years, said Kara Holmquist, director of advocacy for the Massachusetts Society to Prevent Cruelty to Animals, a non-profit organization committed to preventing animal cruelty that is supporting Montigny's bill.

Holmquist added that there are now numerous products and methods effective in solving scratching problems. Owners may train their cats to scratch designated other surfaces, regularly trim their claws or equip the cat with plastic nail caps.

As it currently stands, most veterinary and animal welfare organizations do not recommend declawing. The AVMA suggests veterinarians educate owners on the potential risks and that it only be performed after training to prevent scratching has failed. The ASPCA recommends that it only be used as a last resort before euthanasia. The CVMA and Humane Society oppose non-therapeutic declawing altogether.

Outside the U.S. and Canada, declawing has never been considered standard practice. It is illegal in the U.K., Ireland, Australia, and most of Europe. It has also been banned in certain cities in the U.S. Currently, four other states have bills that would outlaw declawing.

"There's no other way to protect veterinarians who do not want to do it," said Conrad.