

Limiting non-essential surgeries in shelter and spay-neuter clinics

Background:

A recommendation to limit “non-essential” or “elective” surgical procedures has been made by the U.S. Surgeon General. While the American Hospital Association has responded to this recommendation by noting it is important for doctors and hospitals to be able to make decisions about prioritized care independently, many hospitals including some hospitals for children have already announced their intention to comply. All health care professionals need to adopt strategies that will allow them to conserve PPE as much as possible, including veterinarians. Veterinary medicine is part of the overall health care umbrella we have in the United States. The AVMA recently stated that veterinary practices can and should defer elective procedures to preserve medical supplies when circumstances call for that but also must be able to provide medically necessary care.

For the purpose of these recommendations a non-emergency (“elective” or “non-essential”) surgical procedure is one that is not urgently required in order to maintain the health of the patient. Most spays and neuters, even pre-adoption, are non-emergency procedures.

Conservation of PPE is not the only reason to defer non-emergency surgeries. Either currently or in the next several weeks it is expected that shelters will experience:

- Reduced staffing in shelters as staff and volunteers become ill or need to quarantine. If the number of animals in shelters does not also decrease dramatically a crisis of care may develop with insufficient capacity and supplies to care for the animals in the shelter.
- Continued need for veterinary care for animals with reduced veterinary capacity
- Scarcity of medical equipment and supplies
- Need to limit contact between people in an effort to reduce human exposure

Recommendations:

Given the current pandemic, in an effort to reduce resource use, workload, and the potential for human exposure, shelters and spay-neuter clinics should make decisions about which spay-neuter surgeries and other procedures are non-emergency procedures and discontinue those that could be deferred. The simplest pathway to continuing adoptions and other placements while deferring those surgeries may vary by organization. Adopting with vouchers to return for surgery when the pandemic has resolved or utilizing foster to adoption programs where laws require surgery prior to adoption, will help to avert adding animal welfare crises to the current human crisis by keeping animals moving through the shelter. Euthanasia should not be utilized as an alternative to releasing animals to adopters/foster unsterilized. For some animals, spay or neuter surgery prior to adoption or foster may be deemed essential either to encourage placement, support the human-animal bond, or be in the best interest of the animal (e.g., pyometra).

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