

Declawing and Science

by Jean Hofve DVM • April 24, 2013

By Jean Hofve, DVM (Updated 2/24/2011)

This summary presents the main arguments against a legal ban on declawing (of cats and other animals), and the documented, scientific facts about each one—as opposed to the opinions expressed by the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) and various other individuals and organizations.

Assertion #1: A 2011 poll showed that 60% of American pet owners, including 55% of cat owners, say it is OK to have a cat declawed.

Fact: Polls can be manipulated in many ways, both intentional and unintentional. The sample design, the number and demographic makeup of people sampled, the way the questions are asked, the order in which the questions are asked, the laxity of the margin of error, and the way the data are analyzed, all affect the outcome. As Winston Churchill said, “Polls are the worst way of measuring public opinion and public behavior, or of predicting elections—except for all of the others.”

The poll also reported that 32% of cat owners have had their pets declawed. But 36% of all pet owners said declawing was “not OK.” Eighteen percent say they would favor a law making the procedure illegal, and cat owners were more likely to support a law banning the declawing of cats—24 percent favor such a law, 16 percent strongly.

Public opinion is subject to change; and the change is now moving in favor of more humane treatment of all animals. The veterinary profession is only just now getting clued in, having added “animal welfare” to its Veterinarian’s Oath late in 2010. The inertia of the profession is huge and could take many years to shift, especially since there is also a strong financial disincentive to admit that a lucrative procedure is inhumane or even cruel. While we wait for veterinarians to catch up, it is necessary to legally mandate some changes now.

Assertion #2: There is no evidence that declawing causes behavior problems.

Facts: This is a favorite claim of veterinarians and their associations. Pro-declawers point to statistics showing that declawed and clawed cats are equally likely to bite, and the incidence of litterbox problems is roughly similar. But when you more closely examine the “evidence,” it becomes clear that pro-declawers are ignoring, distorting, or outright lying about it.

The AVMA’s position statement is carefully crafted to state that “There is no scientific evidence that declawing leads to behavioral abnormalities when the behavior of declawed cats is

compared with that of cats in control groups.” Well, duh! It’s really hard to use a control group when the treatment group is having 1/3 of its paws amputated—cats do know if they’ve been operated on or not.

The only valid control group in a study on procedures like declawing is a “self” control group. That is, you compare the behavior of the individual cat before declawing to the same cat’s behavior after declawing. When you do that, you find plenty of evidence that declawing causes behavior problems.

Most studies on declawing have been very short-term (hours to days). While not many studies followed cats long enough, or were thorough enough, to fully evaluate post-surgical behavior, at least nine studies reported one or more behavioral complications at some point after surgery. In the most credible, long-term studies, the data show that up to 1/3 of declawed cats develop behavior problems after declawing.

1. One study documented that 33% of cats developed behavior problems (house soiling or biting) after being declawed. This was the longest follow-up period (5 years) ever studied. (Yeon SC, Flanders JA, Scarlett JM, et al. Attitudes of owners regarding tendonectomy and onychectomy in cats. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2001;218:43-47.)
2. In another study, 16% of declawed cats developed behavior problems (12% biting), and more declawed (55%) than clawed (45%) cats were referred to a vet teaching hospital for behavior problems. This is the second-longest follow-up period (2 years) ever examined. (Bennett M, Houpt KA, Erb HN. Effects of declawing on feline behavior. *Comp Anim Pract* 1988;2:7-12.)
3. Inappropriate elimination was twice as common in declawed (52.4%) as intact cats (29.1%). (Patronek, GJ, Glickman LT, Beck AM, et al. Risk factors for relinquishment of cats to an animal shelter. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 1996;209:582–588.)
4. Eleven cats (4%) developed or had worse behavior problems post-declawing; 5 clients reported that their cats had developed litterbox and biting problems. (Landsberg GM. Cat owners’ attitudes toward declawing. *Anthrozoos* 1991;4:192-197.)
5. A study of laser vs. scalpel techniques stated that laser declawing results in fewer behavior complications than scalpel declawing, implying that both techniques still resulted in at least some behavioral issues. (Levy J, Lapham B, Hardie E, et al. Evaluation of laser onychectomy in the cat. *Proceedings. 19th Annu Meet Soc Laser Med.* 1999;73.)
6. Chronic pain syndrome of onychectomy has been described by a pain management specialist as leading to unwanted behaviors, including increased aggression. (Gaynor J. Chronic pain syndrome feline onychectomy. *NAVC Clinicians’ Brief.* 2005 April.)
7. A prospective study comparing declawing with tendonectomy noted many medical as well as behavior complications. (Jankowski AJ, Brown DC, Duval J, et al. Comparison of effects of elective tenectomy or onychectomy in cats. *J Am Vet Med Assoc.* 1998;213:370-373.)
8. An internet survey found that declawed cats were more likely to jump on tables and counters, and also house-soiled more than non-declawed cats (25% vs. 15%). (Morgan M, Houpt KA. Feline behavior problems: the influence of declawing. *Anthrozoos.* 1989;3:50-53.)

9. A review of the veterinary literature on declawing found evidence of behavior problems after surgery. Declawed cats were almost as likely to bite as unneutered cats. (Patronek GJ. Assessment of claims of short- and long-term complications associated with onychectomy in cats. *J Am Vet Med Assoc*. 2001 Oct 1;219(7):932-937.)

Assertion #3: A ban would result in increased relinquishment, causing many cats to be euthanized and increasing the cost for animal control.

Facts: The actual data suggest just the opposite: declawed cats are more likely to be relinquished than normal cats, so relinquishments should go down. Unwanted behavior is a major factor in relinquishment of cats to shelters. House-soiling, aggression, and biting are the top 3 reasons why cats are surrendered; as noted, these are the very same problems that 1 in 3 declawed cats will develop after surgery.

- While declawing (as a single variable) appears to “save cats’ homes,” analysis using a more reliable statistical method (that accounts for all variables) shows that declawed cats are nearly twice as likely to be relinquished to a shelter than clawed cats (actual odds 1.89 to 1, range 1-3.58). (Patronek, GJ, Glickman LT, Beck AM, et al. Risk factors for relinquishment of cats to an animal shelter. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 1996;209:582–588.)

While veterinarians have opined that up to 75% of people who request declawing would get rid of their cat if surgery couldn’t be done (thus providing the rationale that declawing somehow “saves” cats), a survey of their own clients found that only 4% would euthanize or relinquish if declawing weren’t an option. (It is a well-known tendency among veterinarians to vastly underestimate both the resources and the compassion of their clients. They don’t know, because they don’t ask.)

- In a survey of Canadian veterinarians, only 102 were willing to venture a guess as to how many of their clients would have given up their cats if not for declawing (their estimate was 57%). This brief (1-1/2 page) article has become the foundation for claims that declawing “saves” cats’ homes or lives. The entire argument rests on this flimsy excuse that was proved completely false by the next study by the same author. (Landsberg GM. Declawing is controversial but saves pets. A veterinarian survey. *Vet Forum* 1991;8:66-67.)
- A survey of 276 clients (of those same veterinarians who guessed that 57% of their clients would have gotten rid of their cats) found that a whopping 4% would have seriously considered doing so. Because this study was published in a journal that few vets even know exists, it has remained obscure, and most vets who favor declawing use only the flawed and 99%-wrong figures. (Landsberg GM. Cat owners’ attitudes toward declawing. *Anthrozoos* 1991;4:192-197.)

Veterinarians who do follow the AVMA guidelines (which require veterinarians to disclose told the nature of the surgery, the potential complications, and the non-surgical alternatives) find that a large majority (75-90%) of people requesting declawing will change their minds when they are fully informed. In addition, no matter what the laws are, there are always previously-declawed

cats available for adoption from local shelters and rescues and even online (Petfinder, etc.) for people who insist that their cat be declawed.

Assertion #4: Cat scratch disease and other injuries to humans are preventable by declawing, so a ban will adversely affect people who declaw their cats for reasons of human health.

Fact: The #1 reason cats are declawed is to protect household furnishings; potential harm to humans is a distant second.

1. The primary reason given for electing to have a cat declawed was damage to furniture. (Bennett M, Houpt KA, Erb HN. Effects of declawing on feline behavior. *Comp Anim Pract* 1988;2:7-12.)
2. Scratching household materials was the top reason for electing declawing or tendonectomy surgery. (Yeon SC, Flanders JA, Scarlett JM, et al. Attitudes of owners regarding tendonectomy and onychectomy in cats. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2001;218:43-47.)
3. Declawing is frequently performed in cats for behavioral reasons...often as the only solution to scratching on objects such as chairs, couches, or draperies. (Hart BL. Feline Behavior. *Feline Practice*. 1972 Mar-Apr;6-8.
4. A 2009 survey of its members by the Southern California Veterinary Medical Association found that 95% of owners cited household damage as the main reason for declawing. (So Cal Vet Med Assoc. *Pulse*. 2009 Nov:4)

Facts: Cat bites are far more dangerous than scratches (which are usually accidental). Cats bites can be very deep, and they often bleed profusely. Because of their increased tendency to bite, declawed cats may present an increased risk to humans, particularly those on medications such as blood thinners, or who are immunocompromised by drugs, organ transplantation, or diseases such as HIV. Medical doctors, including the U.S. Public Health Service, do not recommend declawing cats for disease prevention.

1. 18% of cats had an increase in biting habits or intensity of biting after being declawed. (Yeon SC, Flanders JA, Scarlett JM, et al. Attitudes of owners regarding tendonectomy and onychectomy in cats. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2001;218:43-47.)
2. Ten cats (4%) began biting or would bite harder post-operatively. (Landsberg GM. Cat owners' attitudes toward declawing. *Anthrozoos* 1991;4:192-197.)
3. In those cats where declawing is being considered to prevent injuries, the hind claws and teeth are likely to do as much or more damage. (Landsberg, G. Private communication.)
4. "You need not declaw the cat." Bartlett JG, Finkbeiner AK. *The Guide to Living with HIV Infection: Developed at the Johns Hopkins AIDS Clinic*. Baltimore MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press. 2001 (5th ed.):88.
5. "For people with weak immune systems...avoid rough play with cats that could lead to scratches or bites." National Institutes of Health, Department of Health & Human Services.
6. "Do not tease or provoke a cat. Most scratches and bites come from cats that are provoked. (American Academy of Family Physicians, FamilyDoctor.org).

Facts: Despite its nickname, the organism that causes “cat scratch disease,” Bartonella, is primarily transmitted by fleas, ticks, lice, and biting flies; blood transfusion is a recently described method of infection.

1. Dogs are more susceptible to disease and actually carry more zoonotic species of Bartonella (5) than cats (only 2). Cats are usually asymptomatic carriers. Both cats and dogs are major reservoirs of Bartonella, but getting “Cat Scratch Fever” from an actual cat scratch is quite uncommon; it is a vector-borne disease. (Chomel BB, Boulouis H-J, Maruyama S, Breitschwerdt EB. Bartonella spp. in pets and effect on human health. *J Am Vet Med Assoc.* 2004 Apr 15;224(8):1270-1279.)
2. “Getting rid of fleas on your cat will also keep you and your family members from catching the infection [Bartonella].” (American Academy of Family Physicians, FamilyDoctor.org.

Assertion #5: Veterinarians follow the AVMA guidelines and don’t need to be regulated.

Facts: Despite AVMA’s own ethical guidelines, which require full disclosure and education of clients as to the nature of the surgery (10 separate amputations), potential risks and complications, and good-faith attempts to modify scratching behavior by the many safe, humane alternatives, these guidelines are frequently ignored:

1. Veterinarians declawed 70% of cats at less than 1 year of age (range 0.5 to 12 months; note that a cat 0.5 months of age is a 2-week old kitten). (Landsberg GM. Cat owners’ attitudes toward declawing. *Anthrozoos* 1991;4:192-197.)
2. A survey by the Southern California Veterinary Medical Association found that 76% of cats were declawed at less than 8 months of age. (So Cal Vet Med Assoc. *Pulse.* 2009 Nov:4)

Assertion #6: Declawing is a very safe procedure, and cats recover just fine in a few days.

Facts: There are many potential medical complications of declawing. Documented short- and long-term physical complications include:

1. Pain
2. Hemorrhage (bleeding)
3. Laceration of the paw pads
4. Swelling
5. Reluctance to bear weight on affected limbs
6. Neuropraxia (transient motor paralysis)
7. Radial nerve damage
8. Lameness
9. Infection
10. Abscess
11. Tissue necrosis
12. Wound dehiscence (re-opening of surgical site)
13. Incomplete healing

14. Protrusion of 2nd phalanx (middle finger bone)
15. Claw regrowth
16. Scurs (growth of deformed claw segments)
17. Retention of flexor process of last bone (3rd phalanx)
18. Chronic draining tracts
19. Self-mutilation
20. Dermatitis
21. Lethargy
22. Palmigrade stance (walking on wrists)
23. Chronic intermittent lameness
24. Chronic pain syndrome
25. Flexor tendon contracture
26. Aggression
27. Cystitis (bladder infection associated with stress)

Fact: Many studies show that complications are extremely common:

1. Medical complications occurred in 51.5% of cats declawed by the shear technique, and 82.5% of cats declawed by the blade technique, while the cats were still hospitalized; 19.8% of cats developed complications after release. Lameness was noted for 1-42 days (1 cat was still painful 96 months—8 years—later). Problems were blamed on the vet students doing the surgery. (Tobias KS. Feline onychectomy at a teaching institution: a retrospective study of 163 cases. *Vet Surg* 1994; 23:274-280.)
2. Out of 320 veterinarians surveyed, 34.8% reported long-term complications. (Landsberg GM. Declawing is controversial but saves pets. A veterinarian survey. *Vet Forum* 1991;8:66-67.)
3. According to owners, 80% of cats had at least one medical complication following surgery; 55% took >3 and up to 14 days to recover. (Yeon SC, Flanders JA, Scarlett JM, et al. Attitudes of owners regarding tenectomy and onychectomy in cats. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2001;218:43-47.)
4. Claw regrowth was seen in 1 cat at 6 months post-op (claw regrowth can take months to many years). Complications included 19% lameness, 34% dehiscence (re-opening of the incision). (Martinez SA, Hauptmann J, Walshaw R. Comparing two techniques for onychectomy in cats and two adhesives for wound closure. *Vet Med* 1993; 88:516-525.)
5. An unusual complication occurred 3 and 6 months post-declaw in 2 cats that involved contracture of the flexor tendon. This caused the toe remnants to curl under the paw, and made the cats unable to walk; one hopped on his back feet, and the other would not move. They were successfully treated by severing the flexor tendon. (Cooper MA, Lavery PH, Solderer EE. Bilateral flexor tendon contracture following onychectomy in 2 cats. *Can Vet J*. 2005 March;46:244-246.)
6. 24% of cats had postoperative complications. (Jankowski AJ, Brown DC, Duval J, et al. Comparison of effects of elective tenectomy or onychectomy in cats. *J Am Vet Med Assoc*. 1998;213:370-373.)

Fact: Post-operative pain remains a problem and is not treated effectively or for long enough, even by those who know better.

1. A review of pain management asked the question, “Considering what is currently known about pain and the resources available to veterinarians, an important question remains: Why do so many dogs and cats suffer needlessly?” The author concluded that much more education—and a fundamental shift in attitude—is still needed. (Hellyer PW. Ethical considerations in the treatment of pain. *Vet Forum*. 2002 June:38-41.)
2. The most commonly used pain medication, butorphanol, was found to be a poor choice for declawing of cats, because it has a very short duration of action (90 minutes). (Tobias KM, Harvey RC, Byarlay JM. A comparison of four methods of analgesia in cats following ovariohysterectomy. *Vet Anaesth Analg*. 2006 Nov;33(6):390-398.)
3. A survey of veterinarians about their pain management protocols found that 30% gave no pain medication at all to cats undergoing declawing, while a large majority of the rest used butorphanol, which is poorly effective. (Wagner AE, Hellyer PW. Survey of anesthesia techniques and concerns in private veterinary practice. *J Am Vet Med Assoc*. 2000 Dec 1;217(11):1652-1657.)
4. A force-plate analysis of 27 declawed cats treated with 3 different pain protocols found that all cats were still shifting their weight off their front paws 12 days after surgery. They authors suggested that (even though they did not do it themselves) pain management should be continued for at least 12 days post-op. (Romans CW, Gordon WJ, Robinson DA, et al. Effect of postoperative analgesic protocol on limb function following onychectomy in cats. *J Am Vet Med Assoc*. 2005 Jul 1;227(1):89-93.)
5. In response, a group of five veterinarians wrote a letter to the editor of JAVMA objecting to the lack of adequate pain relief. (Hornstein SE, Stein R, Thompson D, et al. Questions analgesic protocols and conclusions of onychectomy study. *J Am Vet Med Assoc*. 2005 Jul 1;227(1):89-93.)
6. Despite their own recommendations, the same authors subsequently did another study on declawing in which they provided equally poor pain control and only for 2 days. (Robinson DA, Romans CW, Gordon-Evans WJ, et al. Evaluation of short-term limb function following unilateral carbon dioxide laser or scalpel onychectomy in cats. *J Am Vet Med Assoc*. 2007 Feb 1;230(3):353-8.)
7. This time, I personally wrote a Letter to the Editor of JAVMA about the lack of pain control, which was published. (Hofve JC. Objects to analgesic procedures in cat study. *J Am Vet Med Assoc*. 2007 Feb 1;230(3):353-8.)

Facts: A recurring theme in studies assessing pain associated with declawing is the difficulty of knowing how much pain a cat is experiencing. Objective measurements of blood parameters (such as adrenaline and cortisol) were found to be unreliable and insensitive to the degree of pain. Subjective methods, such as pain scores, have also proven unsatisfactory and relatively insensitive to the degree of pain being felt.

1. Efforts to correlate pain with physiologic parameters were not very useful. (Benson GJ, Wheaton LG, Thurmon JC et al. Postoperative catecholamine response to onychectomy in isoflurane-anesthetized cats. Effect of analgesics. *Vet Surg* 1991;20:222-225.)
2. Physiologic measurements did not correspond to pain. (Cambridge AJ, Tobias KM, Newberry RC et al. Subjective and objective measurements of postoperative pain in cats. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2000;217:685-690.)

3. An attempt to find an objective indicator for post-op pain found that blood pressure was the most reliable measurement. (Smith JD, Allen SW, Quandt JE, et al. Indicators of postoperative pain in cats and correlation with clinical criteria. *Am J Vet Res.* 1996 Nov;57(11):1674-1678.)
4. Until recently, cats' perioperative and traumatic pain was seriously underestimated and under treated. It is difficult to detect and assess pain in cats because they do not demonstrate overtly painful behaviors. Cats' unique metabolism makes many common analgesics unavailable for use. (Taylor PM, Robertson SA. Pain management in cats—past, present and future. *J Fel Med & Surg.* 2004;6:313-320.)

Facts: Stoicism may be cats' greatest enemy in the declaw debate. Nobody declaws dogs—in vet school we were told that it's too painful. Dogs whine, scream and howl; their pain is easy to recognize. But cats are quiet, and they characteristically endure pain without complaint. It is axiomatic in science that “lack of evidence does not equal evidence of lack.” With cats, a lack of obvious signs of pain does not mean the cat isn't feeling pain; it may even be feeling a great deal of pain.

1. “Cats, due to their stoic nature, are notorious for not expressing pain and suffering.” (Benson GJ, Wheaton LG, Thurmon JC, et al. Postoperative catecholamine response to onychectomy in isoflurane-anesthetized cats: effect of analgesics. *Vet Surg.* 1991;20(3):222-225.)
2. “...orthopedic procedures involving the fingers and toes of humans are associated with severe postoperative pain...” (Ibid.)
3. “Detection of pain in cats is a particular challenge, because signs of pain in cats are often subtle.” Cambridge AJ, Tobias KM, Newberry RC et al. Subjective and objective measurements of postoperative pain in cats. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2000;217:685-690.
4. “Onychectomy is a painful procedure in cats...Unfortunately, cats typically receive analgesic medications for postoperative pain less often than do dogs.” (Romans CW, Gordon WJ, Robinson DA, et al. Effect of postoperative analgesic protocol on limb function following onychectomy in cats. *J Am Vet Med Assoc.* 2005 Jul 1;227(1):89-93.
5. Declawing is considered to be one of the most painful procedures an animal can undergo; regardless of method used, it is much more painful than spaying or neutering. *Position statement on declawing.* (American Association of Feline Practitioners. 2007 Nov. <http://www.catvets.com/professionals/guidelines/position/index.aspx?ID=291>, accessed 12/25/09).

Assertion #7: Not very many veterinarians do declaws any more, and then only a few per years.

Fact: There are about 90 million pet cats in the U.S., and estimates of how many of them are declawed range from 25-45% (22.5-40 million cats). Clearly, a lot of veterinarians are declawing a lot of cats.

- A survey of Southern California veterinarians found that 86% of hospitals perform declawing, although the average number of declaw surgeries was estimated to be only 14 per year. (So Cal Vet Med Assoc. Pulse. 2009 Nov:4)

- In the only published survey on the subject, 78% of veterinarians would perform declaw surgery “on request.” (Landsberg GM. Declawing is controversial but saves pets. A veterinarian survey. *Vet Forum* 1991;8:66-67.) To put current numbers in perspective, less than a decade ago, fewer veterinarians (78%) would perform declawing surgery. (Landsberg GM. Declawing is controversial but saves pets. A veterinarian survey. *Vet Forum*. 1991;8:66-67.)
- “Regardless of the exact proportion, there is solid evidence that onychectomy is a common elective procedure. (Patronek GJ. Assessment of claims of short- and long-term complications associated with onychectomy in cats. *J Am Vet Med Assoc*. 2001 Oct 1;219(7):932-937.)

Assertion #8: Veterinarians don’t offer “package deals” to encourage declawing.

Fact: Such “deals” are extremely common. Just check your local paper for coupons.

1. One survey found that veterinarians declawed 69% of cats at the same time as spay/neuter. (Landsberg GM. Cat owners’ attitudes toward declawing. *Anthrozoos* 1991;4:192-197.)
2. A similar survey discovered that 450/851 (52.9%) feline sterilizations had onychectomy performed at the same time. (Pollari FL, Bonnett BN. Evaluation of postoperative complications following elective surgeries of dogs and cats at private practices using computer records. *Can Vet J* 1996;37:672-678.)

Assertion #9: Veterinarians don’t have a profit motive for declawing.

Of course they do. The only “loss leader” in veterinary medicine is spay/neuter surgery, which is often done for a smaller fee than it actually costs the veterinarian to do. However, everyone agrees that pet overpopulation is a huge problem, so most vets discount it significantly to make it more accessible to more people. However, they have to turn a profit on everything else—meaning it has to make money even after accounting for staff time, overhead, and supplies.

Since the late 1990s, the veterinary profession has become progressively more enthralled with surgical lasers. Lasers were originally (and heavily) promoted specifically for declawing, although these days they’re used for many other procedures as well. Despite touted advantages, there is little evidence that lasers are better for the cat. However, they may be much better for the veterinarian’s bottom line:

From a “laser consultant” on the cost vs. potential profit (as of Sept. 2009):

“Most practices spend an average of \$30,000 for a surgical Laser. There is very little on going cost (Average less than \$500/year) other than plugging the units in. Most units are fairly durable so repairs are infrequent but can run anywhere from a few hundred dollars to a few thousand when a major overhaul is required (Usually once every 4-6 years) If you look at the cost of the Laser on a finance rate, most practices are spending about \$675 a month for their Laser for 5 years. If they average 10 surgeries a week and an average compliance of 70% with an average Laser fee of \$50, then practices are generating about \$1,500/month in revenue. It is very easy to

pay for the Laser and most practices are actually generating a profit. Larger practices can be generating \$4,000-\$5,000 a month in Laser revenue.”

A Brief History of Declawing

Declawing (more accurately described as “partial paw amputation”) was “invented” in 1966, but did not become common until the 1970s. Opposition to declawing has been there all along. Even in 1971, researchers note that “onychectomy (declawing) of the cat is a controversial subject among veterinarians and breeders” (Sis, 1971). Veterinarians are supposed to be in the business of helping animals; to waffle and stall and make excuses does not put the profession in a very flattering light.

Many processes and procedures have been promoted over the years that are now considered inhumane. California’s passage of Proposition 2 in 2008 to improve the welfare of farm animals (which outlawed practices that are still defended by the veterinary profession) is just one example.

Declawing by ligation, and declawing of newborn kittens and exotic cats were once acceptable; articles were published on how to do them in major veterinary publications.

- In this experiment, Japanese researchers declawed all four paws of 14 “laboratory kittens” by ligation—tying a very tight suture around the last joint of each toe to stop blood flow and kill the tissue. It took 2 weeks for the claws and attached bones to fall off. Ligation (a common method of castration of farm animals such as piglets) is known to be extremely painful. (Kokue E, Nagano K. Declawing the laboratory kitten by ligation. *Jikken Dobutsu*. 1973 Apr;22(2):149-50.)
- A veterinarian declawed four litters (total 12 kittens) from 2 to 5 days old, with no anesthesia and no pain control. He said, “Those declawed at 5 days of age were a little more active and difficult to restrain.” Claw regrowth occurred in the first litter 2 years later. Staples GE. Declawing neonatal kittens. *Vet Med Small Anim Clin*. 1978 Jul;73(7):895-6.
- Seventy kittens, 3-10 days old, were used for this experiment. All the kittens in one litter, declawed at one day of age, were killed and eaten by their mother the same night; the authors suggested that cats should be watched more closely, and kittens not declawed until age 3 days to prevent similar incidents. (Sis RF, Herron MA. Onychectomy of the newborn kitten. *Fel Med Surg*. 1971 Nov-Dec;31-33.)
- As of 1979, this clinic had been using their own method of declawing for 8 years; and had declawed “300 domestic cats and on all four feet of 50 exotic cats.” A technique of onychectomy for exotic felidae. Peddie JF. *Vet Med Small Anim Clin*. 1979 Sep;74(9):1347-51.

Today, declawing day-old kittens is unthinkable, and declawing exotic carnivores is illegal (banned by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 2006). Times are changing; as a society, we are becoming more compassionate, and less tolerant of unnecessarily animal suffering. The veterinary profession as a whole is lagging behind; until it catches up, it’s up to the rest of us to abolish its most egregious errors.

Final Thoughts:

There is one more argument against an ordinance banning declawing that needs to be addressed.

The CVMA and other veterinarians insist that the decision whether or not to declaw should be left up to the client and the veterinarian; that it is a medical procedure that outsiders should not meddle in. That sounds like a good point.

However, declawing is not being used as a medical procedure. Instead, it is a behavioral “quick fix.”

The problem is that veterinarians are not trained in pet behavior. My (Dr. Jean’s) entire education on pet behavior was a film by Ian Dunbar about dogs.

- In the late 1990s, it was estimated that approximately 224,000 dogs and cats were euthanized annually in the U.S. because of behavior problems. A survey found that veterinarians did not routinely inquire about animal behavior and often were not confident in their clinical skills to treat behavior problems. (Patronek GJ, Dodman NH. Attitudes, procedures, and delivery of behavior services by veterinarians in small animal practice. *J Am Vet Med Assoc.* 1999 Dec;1;215(11):1606-1611.)

However, veterinarians are trained in surgery. Surgeons have a rather different attitude, as evidenced by sayings such as “A chance to cut is a chance to heal,” and “Nothing heals like cold blue steel.”

But there’s another saying: “A man with a hammer sees everything as a nail.” Because vets aren’t trained to solve behavior problems, and they aren’t familiar with the many alternatives to declawing, they naturally default to the one skill they do have—surgery.

In the December 1, 2009, issue of the *Journal of the AVMA*, there was a little news blurb, “California bans cow tail docking.” This bill was supported by the CVMA; AVMA has “disapproved” of the procedure for years. Cow tail docking is done for convenience; it keeps cows cleaner and makes the job of the dairy farmer easier. But it was deemed to be animal cruelty, and is illegal in California as of January 1, 2010.

Declawing is perfectly analogous to cow tail docking. It is done for the convenience of the owner. It’s a surgical solution to a non-surgical problem.

The California law permits a cow’s tail to be docked for the health of the cow. In the same way, declawing bans would still allow the surgery in those rare cases when it is necessary for the health of the cat. In other words, when declawing is truly a medical procedure, the decision appropriately reverts to the owner and veterinarian. When it is not done for medical reasons, it is animal cruelty, and it should be banned.

According to board-certified veterinary behaviorist Dr. Gary Landsberg, “For most cats, appropriate client advice and a little effort is all that is needed to prevent scratching problems.” (Private communication.)

All reasons for non-medical declawing have non-surgical alternatives. There are many humane choices will still protect both human and feline health, as well as sofas and Persian rugs:

1. Scratching posts, mats, corrugated cardboard, logs, softwood boards, sisal rope
2. Training (yes, cats CAN be trained!)
3. Regular claw-trimming
4. Rotary sanders (Peticure, Dremel)
5. Nail caps (SoftPaws, Soft Claws)
6. Emery scratching boards (Emerycat)
7. Double-sided sticky tape (Sticky Paws)
8. Non-stick furniture protectors (Corner Savers, Fresh Kitty Furniture Protectors)
9. Pet repellent sprays
10. Access restriction (upside-down vinyl rug runner)
11. Remote aversive devices (ScatMat, Ssscat)
12. Phermones (Feliway)
13. Furniture covers (blankets, towels—anything loose will not be appealing to your cat!)
14. Those who absolutely insist that no cat of theirs will have claws, can adopt an already-declawed cat (there are many of them in shelters and rescues).

With a little effort, patience, and time, one or more of these alternatives will work for any cat; making it unnecessary and inhumane to use a radical, irreversible surgery to solve a behavior problem.

So, should declawing be against the law? Absolutely.

Morality cannot be legislated, but behavior can be regulated. Judicial decrees may not change the heart, but they can restrain the heartless. — Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The question is not, Can they reason?, nor Can they talk?, but rather, “Can they suffer?”. — Jeremy Bentham

When declawing is outlawed, people will be forced to take responsibility for providing a stimulating and healthy environment for their cats, and do what millions of people around the world already do: accept and enjoy the many wonderful natural behaviors of the cat.

www.littlebigcat.com/article-index/

Copyright © 2015. Jean Hofve DVM and Little Big Cat, Inc. All rights reserved.