

Declawing: Another Veterinarian's Perspective

by Jean Hofve DVM • November 17, 2010

By Special Guest: Michael W. Fox, D.Sc., Ph.D., B.Vet.Med., M.R.C.V.S.

Say No! To De-clawing Cats

Many veterinarians routinely de-claw young cats. It's part of the package when they come in to be spayed/neutered. Many cats suffer as a consequence. The operation entails more than simply removing the claws, (onychectomy) under general anesthesia. It entails removal of the first digit (digitectomy). It's like you having your toes and fingers removed at the first joint, i.e. a radical phalangectomy.

Cats are very dexterous, and this operation essentially eliminates their dexterity, greatly reducing their behavioral repertoire when it comes to grasping and holding. It also hampers their ability to groom and scratch themselves normally. Their ability and self-confidence when it comes to climbing and general agility are similarly crippled. Their first line of defense—their retractable claws— is eliminated, which could make some cats more anxious and defensive.

De-clawed cats tend to walk abnormally back on their heels rather than on their entire pads because of the chronic pain at the end of their severed fingers and toes. They often develop chronic arthritis and as the front toe pads shrink, chronic bone infections are common.

Many cats find it painful to use the litter box, develop a conditioned aversion to using the box, and become un-housebroken. This is why many de-clawed cats are put up for adoption or are euthanized. They may also bite more, and become defensive when handled because their paws are hurting and infected.

I strongly advise all prospective cat owners, and those people with cats who are contemplating having the entire first digit—not simply the claw—removed surgically from their cats' paws—never to have this operation performed on their felines.

Cats need their claws to be cats, and the routine surgical amputation of all their first digits is considered unthinkable in the UK and many other countries where people love and respect their cats. They know that properly handled and socialized cats quickly learn not to scratch people, and will learn to enjoy using a scratch post and not destroy upholstered furniture.

According to the Paw Project (www.pawproject.org), de-clawing has become extremely common in the US and Canada in the past three decades. Before that time, it was rarely performed. In most countries, de-clawing is considered unethical and is not performed by veterinarians. De-clawing is illegal in many countries, including Austria, Croatia, Malta, Israel,

Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Norway, Portugal, Romania, Sweden, Switzerland, and Turkey.

I wrote the following letter on this topic to my colleagues; it was published in the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*, Feb. 15, 2006, pages 503-504.

Dear Sir,

The article by Drs. Curicio, Bidwell, Bohart, and Hauptman (*JAVMA*, January 1, 2006, pp. 65-680) provides an "Evaluation of signs of postoperative pain and complications after forelimb onychectomy in cats receiving buprenorphine alone or with bupivacaine administered as a four-point regional nerve block." While the consideration given to pain alleviation in this surgical procedure is necessary and laudable, the ethics of performing this procedure as a routine practice to the extent that almost a quarter of the cat population in the US, (14 million) is declawed, according to these authors, surely need to be examined. This is especially pertinent considering the evidence of the painful nature of this procedure, and associated postoperative complications of chronic pain, infection, and suffering. Surely the justifications for performing forelimb onychectomies trivialize concern for cats' welfare and psychological well being.

Part of being a cat is to have claws. Out of respect for the nature of cats and their basic behavioral requirements in the confined domestic environment, caring and responsible cat owners effectively train their cats to use scratch-posts, scratch-boards and carpeted "condos" rather than resort to routine declawing, that amounts to a mutilation for convenience.

As a profession, are we not giving a mixed message to the public in advocating companion animal health and welfare on the one hand, and not abandoning such practices that are considered unethical by veterinarians and their clients in many other countries?

Michael W. Fox, D.Sc., Ph.D., B.Vet.Med., M.R.C.V.S.

Performing phalangectomies on cats as a routine preventive measure, just in case they might scratch people or damage furniture, is a service of convenience to cat owners that I consider professionally unethical for veterinarians to offer and perform as a routine procedure on all cats that come through their doors. It is nothing less than a mutilation that takes away from cats an integral part of what makes them cats—a form of physical deprivation with often profound behavioral and psychological ramifications, the risks of which far outweigh the benefits to uninformed cat owners and lovers. Many veterinarians argue that it is a life-saving procedure because otherwise cats who might damage furniture or scratch their owners are often euthanized if they are not de-clawed. I see this as engaging in self-serving emotional blackmail, financial interests notwithstanding.

Dr. Michael W. Fox, highly respected veterinarian and bioethicist, world-famous syndicated columnist, and author of *Cat Body, Cat Mind* (and many other fabulous books, including *The Healing Touch for Cats: The Proven Massage Program for Cats*, and *Not Fit for a*

Dog!: The Truth About Manufactured Dog and Cat Food) has very graciously allowed us to reprint his essay on declawing. You can find Dr. Fox at: www.DrFoxVet.com.

We can't resist giving you a brief quote from the response to Dr. Fox's letter by the authors of the study he so rightly criticizes:

“Because the potential pain associated with a properly performed onychectomy is trivial, compared with many procedures, we also believe that a properly performed procedure is appropriate for feline companion animal practice.” Hauptman, et al. *J Am Vet Med Assoc*. 2006 Feb 15;228(4):504.

This arrogant attitude and callous disregard for animal welfare typifies the denial common to veterinarians who still perform declaws (unfortunately, still the majority). Declawing has long been acknowledged as one of the most painful procedures done to animals (others in the same class being limb amputation and invasive bone surgery), as proven by the multitude of studies that use declawing as the standard for the testing of pain medications.

If you want to know what *science* really proves about declawing, including the incidence of medical complications, likelihood of behavior problems, and many other aspects, please see our article on [Declawing and Science](#). You'll be surprised, if not shocked, by the many contradictions of veterinary policy by our own professional studies.

www.littlebigcat.com/article-index/

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