Establishing a rehoming program for animals used in research and teaching

Guidelines for licence holders, researchers, teachers and Animal Ethics Committees considering rehoming animals after the conclusion of a research or teaching project.

Licence holders, researchers, teachers and Animal Ethics Committees (AECs) should consider opportunities to rehome animals after a research or teaching project wherever possible. The *Australian code for the care and use of animals for scientific purposes, 8th edition* (Australian code) requires the rehoming of animals to be approved by an AEC on a case-by-case basis, including safeguards to protect the animals' ongoing wellbeing. Legal obligations in relation to pet ownership must also be observed.

This guideline provides assistance to AECs and others developing appropriate safeguards for rehoming potential companion animals.

To ensure the best outcome for rehomed animals, criteria must be in place to select and match animals and new owners. Research organisations and AECs without expertise in suitability assessment and owner selection are encouraged to consider partnering with a reputable animal rescue group to facilitate rehoming. This arrangement should be based on a formal agreement outlining each party's responsibilities and providing opportunities to periodically review the rehoming program.

The Five Domains[1] model provides an excellent framework for a systematic welfare assessment. The persistent effects of any nutritional, environmental, health and behavioural compromise to the animal (pre-project and during the project) should be considered, in sum, to form a precautionary judgement about the likely wellbeing of the animal. A practical example of the application of the Five Domains is available (see reference section overleaf)[2].

Suitability criteria for rehoming

In determining whether an animal would benefit from and is suitable for rehoming, an assessment of its prior life experiences and ongoing health and wellbeing must be made.

A prospective assessment can be made at the planning stage of a project, taking into account the suitability of the animals and the likely effects of the proposed project on their welfare.

To make a thorough assessment of any potential for ongoing welfare impact, the AEC and responsible researchers or teachers should collaborate with all relevant personnel including attending veterinarians, animal carers and animal welfare officers.

At the conclusion of the project, animals must be assessed to ensure that their welfare is as predicted. A veterinary examination and any necessary investigations should be conducted. A behavioural assessment should be made, to assess the animal's temperament, and to plan the transition into a new home.

Some animals will be inherently unsuitable for rehoming:

- Animals suspected of being sick
- Chronically unwell animals requiring ongoing veterinary treatment
- Genetically modified animals
- Unweaned animals

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- Species declared as pest animals (note that mice, rats and rabbits are not declared pest species)
- Animals displaying aggressive behaviour

Permanently disabled animals may be suitable for rehoming to the right carer, as long as the impairment does not cause the animal distress, or unmanageable pain.

Suitability criteria for new owners

Animals must only be rehoused with capable, competent owners with a realistic prospect of caring for the animal for the rest of its life. Although it is not possible to guarantee this outcome, steps can be taken to create the best opportunity.

Screening processes for prospective owners will vary according to the species and individual characteristics of the animals, but should include:

- An application process which collects relevant details likely to influence the compatibility of the animal and owner.
  E.g. a family with children, yard size, etc.
- An interview to clarify details and discuss prior experience with the species and expectations for the rehoming process

The rehoming process

All cats and dogs rehomed from a licensed research organisation must be microchipped by an authorised implanter. The implanter must register the microchip details with a licensed registry within two days of implantation (this applies to all cats, dogs and horses when microchipped, whether retained under the licence or rehomed). Cats and dogs must also be wormed, desexed and vaccinated prior to rehoming, and new owners must be supplied with a microchipping, desexing and vaccination certificate.

Other animals must, as applicable and appropriate for the species, be identified, wormed, vaccinated and desexed prior to rehoming.

Information provided to the new owner should include:

- Any relevant details of previous history, outcomes of assessments and any special care required
- A transfer of microchip ownership form to be submitted to the registry service for cats and dogs
- Feeding, housing, training and responsible pet ownership particular to the species.
  For a comprehensive guide see www.vic.gov.au/pets
- Contingency provisions

Transfer of ownership

Transfer of ownership can be effected by formal agreement, or in the case of microchipped dogs and cats, by changing the microchip ownership details with the animal registry service.

Contingency measures must be in place for all animal placements, including provisions for the animal if the placement fails within a short period of time. The adopting owner should be provided the opportunity of returning unsuitable animals, or given other options for rehoming.

Further information

For further information and assistance with establishing a rehoming program, please contact the Licensing and Audit unit at sp.licensing@agriculture.vic.gov.au

References

[1] Mellor, D.J. Updating Animal Welfare Thinking: Moving beyond the “Five Freedoms” towards “A Life Worth Living”. Animals **2016**, 6, 21.

[2] Littlewood, K.E. & Mellor, D.J. Changes in the Welfare of an Injured Working Farm Dog Assessed Using the Five Domains Model. Animals **2016**, 6, 5.