

IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE MANAGEMENT OF A DOG SHELTER IN BULGARIA

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ABSTRACT

Shelter medicine refers to veterinary care in specialized facilities for homeless animals. It is characterized by some specificities that makes it different from general clinical practice. Many risk factors exist for medical and supportive personnel that should be recognized and prevented by strict control measures. One additional hazard that emerged for collectives working closely together presents the COVID-19 outbreak that spread widely for a short period and lead to alteration of social models and everyday lifestyle. This article tries to answer how the crisis reflected the work span of a dog shelter in Bulgaria as an example of a tendency that may prove to remain constant at least for several years ahead. Consequences from the pandemic and measures to reduce the negative impact on the working environment are discussed.

Key words: Covid, SARS-CoV-2, dog shelter, Bulgaria.

Introduction

Shelter Medicine is a field of veterinary medicine dedicated to the care of homeless animals. It deals with health and welfare of feral populations with emphasis on prevention of animal cruelty and rehoming practices. People that have chosen to work under shelter conditions usually take it as a cause with all the difficulties that can be expected. Handling feral animals can be a risky enterprise accompanied by a number of hazards such as physical (bites, scratches), chemical (burns, skin irritations, inhalation, ingestion), infectious (zoonoses), connected to work load (heavy lifting, repetitive motion, body mechanics, posture), exposure to allergens (NDSU Guidelines for Occupational Health and Safety, 2015).

The emergence of SARS-CoV-2 presents an additional threat to human health and welfare that has also changed dramatically the models in many spheres of life. The virus was initially reported to the WHO on December 31, 2019. The outbreak was declared a global health emergency on 30 Jan 2020 and a global pandemic on 11 Mar 2020 – a designation that was not utilized by the organization since the H1N1 pandemic in 2009 (Cennimo, 2021).

An year later the crisis is still active with people struggling to conserve the frame of normality. This is especially true in jobs where working from home is not possible. The workload in a shelter is constant with emergency cases that should be addressed urgently. Having the staff ready and present ensures a good practice. However, the pandemic resulted in an altered routine where human-to-human interaction is subjected to distance. In the context of a shelter the problem includes not only staff but also volunteers and visitors. It is highly significant that the situation is understood and all the preventive measures are taken to reduce the probability for disease distribution.

There is little scientific data about the impact of COVID-19 on animal shelters. The pandemic has led to uncertainty and serious health and economic concerns (Morgan, 2020). Attention is concentrated on human health care and reduction of risk factors for medical staff. However, the question should be discussed as shelters play an important social role by reducing the number of homeless

animals and regulating the human-to-animal relationship. Reports warn about the danger of pet abandonment, reduction in the rate of adoptions, overcrowding of pet care units, food shortages (Ayan, 2020). Animal control calls to authorities have also significantly increased (Wood, 2020). During the lockdown in China there were animals abandoned in apartments, left on the streets and in shelters as their owners passed away or were unable or unwilling to continue caring for them. It is expected that many people will face financial challenges or other reasons like hospitalization to make them give up of their pets (WSAVA, 2020). A study carried out by the Affinity Foundation in 102 shelters in Spain during April 2020 found that the COVID confinement resulted in fewer volunteers and less financial resources.

Materials and methods

The study encompasses a period of one year (Feb 2020 to Feb 2021) in a dog shelter situated in Sofia, Bulgaria. Analysis relies on documental data and questionnaires filled online by representatives from the staff. The available scientific literature was accessed for experience and recommendations from other countries.

Results and Discussion

The COVID-19 crisis in Bulgaria

The COVID-19 epidemics began in 2020 with the first case confirmed on 8 Mar. Since then the number of positive tests has risen from 14% in the beginning to 36,35% in Nov 2020. Morbidity reached 224 849 cases and mortality 9 420 cases by 9 Feb 2021 (Medve, 2021). The first lockdown was imposed on 13 Mar 2020 and extended several times. A second lockdown took place from 27 Nov 2020 until 31 Jan 2021. The relative drop in case numbers as well as the start of the immunization program allowed for relaxation of certain measures from 1 Feb 2021.

Irrespective of statistics and publicity the majority of people still seem to be suspicious about the global impact of disease and allow themselves to criticize the severity of control. Wearing a protective mask although obligatory is often omitted as a way of protest or due to neglect.

The place of a dog shelter in the pandemic

This study tries to analyze the changes that took place in a private dog shelter situated in the suburbs of Bulgaria`s capital. The place is a former cowhouse that became the seat of a non-profit organization from Jan 2014. The facility keeps between 100-200 dogs that are prepared for adoption in the country and abroad. It relies on a small number of enthusiasts, namely the staff and volunteers. There are 14 people working in total. Personnel is divided to manage several sectors: the office, the main building with cages for adult dogs, the clinic with separate rooms for puppies, injured and ill patients, infectious and post-operative patients. The shelter runs a successful spay/neuter program and takes signals for emergency cases.

Expected and actual effects from the COVID-19 situation

The first wave of COVID-19 from March 2020 found the shelter like many other institutions unprepared to face the altered conditions in the following months. The facility had to close for visitors which influenced negatively the adoption program. It was expected that abandoned pups and

elderly dogs which comprise the major load on shelter`s population will increase. This was true in the very beginning of the crisis when scientific information mixed with false news and many got confused that the canine coronavirus is the same thing as the COVID-19. Pet dogs were left just because of fear they can transfer the virus. However, the ban for travel and the conscious decision of people to stay home lead to a gradual decrease. Emergency cases were also less often witnessed and therefore not reported. Later in spring when parks were closed and going out was allowed only for individuals walking their dogs interest in adoption was definitely increased. However, such candidates were estimated as unreliable therefore not contributing to effective rehoming. These marginal tendencies were balanced during summer months when epidemiological measures were temporarily reduced.

The most critical time came when people from the staff were infected with COVID-19 and had to discontinue working at least for the 2 weeks of quarantine. The shelter had to fully close again in order to protect the health of remaining workers as well as visitors. Nevertheless morbidity continued to rise with the majority of personnel going through the disease in November - December 2021. From all 14 employees 6 were infected almost at the same time - 3 from the administrative unit and 3 from the supportive staff. Others had to spend self-isolation due to contact. There was a period when only two were available - a veterinarian and an animal caretaker - to manage the whole area.

Another aspect remains volunteer work. People coming to the shelter to spend some time with dogs present a valuable part of its routine. Animals that have stayed for longer often await for weekends when they can be walked and groomed from somebody different from the staff. Furthermore volunteers can spend more time for playing/exercise and many offer their help for feeding or cleaning. This is no more possible as the number of people entering the area is strictly controlled and caretakers are instructed to reduce person-to-person contacts.

The shelter as a private institution relies exclusively on donation. There is an SMS campaign that is very popular in the country. Donation boxes are distributed to several places around the city and bank accounts are published on the organization site. Financial crisis as a consequence of COVID-19 has also affected the income and resources during the last 12 months. A majority of contributors that used to donate for years were not able share for charity especially those occupied with tourism and services. The closure of restaurants, malls and the airport, where many of the shelter boxes are distributed exacerbated the negative financial count.

Measures to reduce the risk of transferring COVID-19

The shelter as a place where animals of different health status constantly enter has always kept high standards for cleaning and disinfection. Measures have become even more strict with COVID-19. The renewed protocol includes additional disinfection of work spaces during the day and a final disinfection at the end of the shift. Wearing of protective masks and clothing has become obligatory. The staff is instructed to keep a high level of personal hygiene with procedures for washing and disinfecting the hands discussed and written in detail.

The most demanding changes were instituted to administration and the adoption policy of the shelter. All communication activities were transferred online and office duties were managed from home. Before COVID-19 adoption procedure included several visits of candidates on the spot, with interviews and introduction between the family members and the future pet, followed by a visit to

the family home. Approved candidates were revisited after the animal had used to the new environment and only then adoption was finalized. After COVID-19 these events started to happen mainly on platforms like Zoom and Skype with visits to the shelter prescheduled and subjected to epidemiological measures. Application forms and questionnaires are filled in and sent by mail. Working with authorities and other connected institutions is also carried on the net.

Recommendations for best shelter practices under COVID-19

A shelter routine has always been busy and now even more with necessities imposed by the situation. There are several recommendations that can be outlined from guidelines published by international animal welfare organizations.

WSAVA (2020) advise pet care facilities to suspend nonessential functions, including the pick-up, transport and sheltering of dogs that are not in imminent danger. Veterinary clinics should prioritize procedures with spay-neuter surgeries, even pre-adoption, postponed to after the epidemiological situation has been relieved to reduce resource-use, workload, and the potential for human exposure. However this is not suitable on Bulgarian soil where the problem with homeless dogs was serious for years and there is still much to be done to actually change the mindset of people. Often the families that adopt and agree to spay/neuter an animal will refuse to return for surgery. Therefore it is my personal opinion that spay/neuter programs should be continued.

Introduction of fostering is suggested as a way to reduce the burden of potentially increased intake. Adoption directly from the foster home is also a possibility. However the latter is not applicable in the context of the shelter in question as the list of volunteers willing to take dogs to their home is scarce. It is not popular and seems engaging for possible candidates to participate in such a way. It would be definitely beneficial if a net of foster homes can be created where animals can reside until adoption; this is especially important for elderly dogs whose chance to be noticed is minimal.

All procedures connected to adoption like interviews, questionnaires, documentation should be conducted online. The shelter has already done a lot on this point. Reduction of adoption fee is not to be discussed as the organization has never charged any.

Another important matter is health safety of staff and visitors. Personnel is regularly instructed of best hygiene practices and disinfection frequency is increased. However, visitors should also be informed about the rule on the territory of the facility, e.g. wearing a protective mask, social distance of more than two meters, washing hands with soap and water before and after handling animals, etc.

According to scientific data the risk of animals spreading COVID-19 to people is considered to be low. However, there are several reports of animals being infected with SARS-CoV-2 including dogs, pet and wild cats, mink, ferret (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). Currently we do not actually know enough about the virus to draw conclusions but species to species transfer can be expected as the pandemic possibly originated from bats in a Chinese market. Authorities in Bulgaria already collect information about cases of canine corona virus infections in shelters. Only time and experience can answer if this practice is relevant or whether dogs and other carnivores can be viewed as a threat to human health.

A number of positive examples can be described from around the world and thanks to the cooperation of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) (Ayan, 2020). Shelters in the Dominican Republic have implemented a feeding program for community stray animals that

normally rely on businesses or individuals for food. Donations of pet food from a New Zealand-based pet food manufacturer provided a crucial resource for pet care facilities in Montreal. A charity program was implemented in Italy to subsidize the cost of food and vet care for the pets of people who have experienced recent economic hardship so that they don't have to abandon or surrender them to already overburdened shelters.

The need of similar initiatives is already visible in Bulgaria. The ability of society to unite under stressful conditions is what can take us out of the crisis. The shelter can potentiate these processes by popularizing its activities during the COVID-19 situation. Video tours around the facility may increase the interest of viewers on the site and Facebook page. The involvement of media is also crucial in order to induce empathy among audience as well as stimulate individuals and businesses to donate.

In spite of difficulties the shelter continues to work with animals in need and run programs for adoption. As a result the number of dogs from spring to autumn fell steadily from about 200 to 150 which is a good news in a usually overcrowded community. The number of adopted pets remained similar to previous years although there was a temporary decrease. In a study conducted by Morgan et al. (2020) abandonment persisted as a stable tendency; however adoption rate was increased as a reaction to social isolation. Therefore shelters should also be prepared for increased demand from people. As humans and dogs are both social animals the relationship can be beneficial for coping with COVID-induced stress and other health consequences.

The review of scientific data on the subject can be estimated as insufficient. Large scale studies are needed to grasp the actual dynamics of the situation and propose working models for shelter management under the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

Life under the pandemic is gradually transferred in the online space. Duties that used to be carried out exclusively in the office now happen in the net and platforms. This is true even for non-profit organizations that rely on contact with their sponsors, volunteers and visitors. Measures have changed the way institutions function. However, society should adapt to the current and future requirements. The dog shelter in Sofia, Bulgaria presents a good example how this can be practically done. Its mission is even more important now when the world goes through hard times. What is hard for people is also hard for animals.

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