

Is there a need for companion animal health programs in western NSW?

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Project Aims

The aim of the companion animal health projects was to improve the overall health of the animal population within communities, which would in turn create a healthier human population. The project aim was achieved by decreasing the number of unwanted animals in the community, improving awareness around the shared environment between humans and animals, and reducing the risk of zoonotic disease transfer between animals and humans.



Healthy Animals =
Healthy People



Stakeholder Roles and
Responsibilities

In each of the communities, a community meeting was used to clearly define what roles and responsibilities would be adopted by the various stakeholders. The main stakeholders involved in the delivery of the projects were: Aboriginal Affairs (AA) Bourke, Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA), Aboriginal Environmental Health Unit (AEHU), Western New South Wales Local Health District (WNSWLHD), Brewarrina Shire Council, Ngemba community working party and the Weilmoringle and Goodooga Local Aboriginal Land Councils. The RSPCA's roles and responsibilities included; assessing the suitability of a premise and submitting the application to approve the location of the temporary veterinary clinic, and providing all clinical veterinary services on the day the clinics were running. The RSPCA was responsible for all surgical, medical and health procedures on the animals. They provided all medical equipment and educational displays for the duration of the clinics, as well as providing phone advice for the environmental health (EH) staff conducting follow-up visits.

AA provided on-the-ground support for all stakeholders and communities. They were responsible for the introductions of the various agencies to the Aboriginal Community Working Party and Local Aboriginal Land Councils, as well as ensuring all relevant stakeholders in the community were notified of the project and provided with a clear, transparent community consultation process. AA consistently liaised with the community working party to ensure local people were engaged and employed for the life of the project.

The AEHU and WNSWLHD's main role was to provide education to pet owners and community members around the public health messaging. This was done by showing pet owners the educational material provided by the RSPCA, as well as one-on-one interaction with pet owners around yard maintenance and animals and the environment. The EH staff provided an interactive hand hygiene program to three local public schools incorporating an animal health message. The EH staff attended the community working party and addressed the public health importance of companion

animal health programs. EH staff conducted follow-up visits to dogs that were de-sexed during the project and used this as an opportunity to complete a follow-up evaluation; this also included producing the report.

Brewarrina Shire Council provided rangers employed by the shire to perform functions and assist with the running of the program. This included transporting animals, locating animals and providing experience and knowledge on animals that previously displayed anti-social behaviour.

The Ngemba community working party, as well as the Weilmoringle and Goodooga Local Aboriginal Land Councils, assisted with finding suitable community members to employ over the week of the program and a facility to house the veterinary clinic.

Community chosen

Selection criteria were identified by RSPCA and AA, based on the established criteria the RSPCA must meet before they can deliver an animal health project.



Map Outlining Brewarrina Shire

Brewarrina, Weilmoringle and Goodooga

Brewarrina Shire is located in northwestern NSW. The shire is reported to be one of the most disadvantaged communities in NSW, with entrenched disadvantage shown in 21 indicators including, internet access, income, education, literacy, long-term unemployment, unskilled workers, domestic violence, juvenile offending and criminal convictions. The shire covers an area of 19,155 square kilometres. The population of the shire is about 18,000. This includes Brewarrina, Weilmoringle and Goodooga. Weilmoringle is approx. 100kms from Brewarrina and has about 20 houses. Goodooga is about 120kms from Brewarrina and has an approximate population of 330. All three communities are predominantly Aboriginal communities.



Image 1



Image 2



Image 3

Image 1: Weilmoringle Public School sign

Image 2: Welcome to Brewarrina sign

Image 3: Goodooga sign

Community consultation phase

The focus of the community meetings was to clearly define who was eligible to access the project, get the community's estimation of how many pets would access the service, identify any suitable community members as who would be interested in casual employment on the clinic days of the projects, establish roles and responsibilities of each agency, and discuss the advertising of the project to the target population. In addition, the community meetings provided an opportunity for the RSPCA to conduct site suitability inspections for setting up temporary veterinary clinics. Prior to any animal health project being established and delivered, the RSPCA are required to submit documentation against a set of criteria to ensure the project is suitable for the location and will not impact on existing veterinary services within the area.



Flyer produced to promote program



Entry into one of the communities

Veterinary services – health checks, surgery and recovery

The clinic days provided veterinary services but also the opportunity to educate the community on responsible pet ownership. Veterinary services offered by the RSPCA on the clinic days were; de-sexing, ivermectin treatment (ticks), worming tablets, flea treatment, health checks and microchipping. The clinic was established for 3 days in Brewarrina, 1 day in Goodooga and 1 day in Weilmoringle. Community members and children were encouraged to view the surgical procedures undertaken.



Animals on the days of the clinic (health checks)



Animals on the days of the clinic (surgery)



Animals on the days of the clinic (recovery)

Clinic week - environmental health role

Our main role as EH role was to provide education around pet ownership and public health importance, as well as provide support to the RSPCA and liaise with communities. We tried to have a discussion with each pet owner about important public health

messages in relation to pet ownership. These messages included: keeping sand pits covered when not used and regularly cleaned, picking up and disposing of dog and cat faeces, and washing your hands after handling animals and/or cleaning up of faeces. Yard maintenance and waste removal was also discussed as part of the project and coincided with a rare rain event and a sudden increase in mosquitoes and sand flies. We attended three primary schools to deliver an interactive hand hygiene project known as Mister Germ. We also incorporated an animal health message similar to the public health education provided to the pet owners; this included what is involved in responsible pet ownership and an interactive demonstration of how our animals can transfer germs to us and our home environments.



Mister Germ delivery at one of the local public schools

Results of clinic week

RSPCA carried out 103 health checks on dogs and cats and 118 dogs and cats were de-sexed. This was roughly the same numbers estimated in the community consultation.

An educational display was provided at each of the temporary clinics by the RSPCA. The display included jars of preserved intestinal worms and ticks. RSPCA vets and other stakeholders, such as, EH and the animal control officer from Brewarrina Shire, discussed with individuals how to care for animals and the potential human health hazards from pets.

As a large amount of parvovirus was identified in the communities, education specifically related to parvo and making pet owners aware that it lasts in the environment for a lengthy period of time, and encouraging pet owners to change bedding, bowls etc.

Post-clinic follow-up

Animal health projects have been run previously in the area without strong involvement from EH. These were the first animal health projects delivered in NSW where a follow-up home visit has occurred post surgery. A methodology for the follow-up visits was adopted. Two staff sorted surgery forms provided by the RSPCA. EH staff made three attempts to gain access to each of the addresses of the de-sexed dogs. If owners were unable to be contacted during the follow-up visits, one attempt to telephone the pet owner was made using the phone number provided during the clinic days. If unsuccessful, no further attempts were made. Follow-up visits occurred approximately 10-14 days after surgery.



Environmental health Staff engaging with pet owner around Public Health Messaging

The evaluation was carried out to determine if:

- Pet owners were satisfied with the treatment provided to the pets,
- Pet owners would have their pets de-sexed without the program, and
- Pet owners were able to interpret and follow animal care advice given by RSPCA veterinary staff.

Results of follow-up

In total, there were 84 dogs de-sexed across three sites over the five-day period. Twenty-six per cent (22/84) of all dogs de-sexed over the five days of the projects were followed up by two EH staff.

Only 26% of the animals that had been de-sexed were in their yards at the time of the follow-up home visit. Of the dogs that were in the yards and seen on follow-up visits, approximately 80% required assistance to remove their sutures.

Only one person said they would have had their dog de-sexed. This correlates with observational and learned experiences from clinic days, where a number of people claimed they would not have been able to endure the financial cost of taking their animal in the car to the next town (100kms) to have their pet de-sexed.

The majority of pet owners (85%) stated that they had understood the care instructions they had taken home from the clinic; however, these results did not correlate with the percentage of pet owners who had not yet removed sutures as the care instructions said to remove sutures after 7 days. This could be a result of people being reluctant to truthfully answer this question if they had low literacy levels.

Public health messaging around yard maintenance was best achieved at individual houses during the post-surgery visits to some of the animals that had been de-sexed. We believe that the evaluation provided accurate feedback and all pet owners that participated were really open and willing. This was mainly due to the ongoing community consultation and engagement.

Public health importance

The companion animal health project provided an opportunity for a PhD student employed by the RSPCA to complete swabbing, collection of ticks and serology testing for a range of zoonotic diseases, including MRSA and Q fever. The RSPCA found a prevalence of MRSA of 2.3% in dogs and cats. This prevalence is among the highest that has been reported. The MRSA isolates from these results confirmed they were all human community-associated strains. A high seroprevalence of Q fever was noted in the dogs sampled. Animals become infected with organisms when they ingest bodily fluids, tissues or diseased carcasses. It is assumed the prevalence of Q fever was higher than usual as kangaroo, emu and wild goats are used as a major food source for companion animals.



Dog eating raw emu leg

Challenges

The biggest challenge in regards to the project was ensuring the services were delivered to the target niche group. As mentioned in previously the target audience was Aboriginal people, with a residence in the community and those who hold a concession or pension card. It was observed over the days of the project that the RSPCA veterinary staff turned away a number of non-Aboriginal pet owners. On some occasions, people who did not identify as Aboriginal but obtained a concession card were asked to come back later in the day. Some property owners accessed the project ;however, they were only allocated space once the target audience needs were met.

During the evaluation and follow-up process, we encountered a few challenges. Time limitation was one of the major challenges faced due to the long distance from the office to these communities. As a result of the time limitations, our evaluation only focused on dogs that were de-sexed and didn't include cats; however, if cats were home and the owner required assistance with suture removal, we were happy to assist. It also meant that we could only make a few attempts to contact the pet owners, which meant some pet owners didn't complete the evaluation. A large number of animals were not home at the time we visited. Our limited experience in dealing with large and anti social dogs made it difficult to remove sutures. If we encountered any problems, the closest vet, who is about 100km away, provided her contact details and was happy to be contacted if anyone had issues or concerns with their pets post-surgery.



Kamilaroi Highway sign

Recommendations

Our recommendations are that Public Health continues to see value in small companion animal health projects and participates in the capacity of community education around zoonotic illness and other more well-known skin infections, such as staphylococcus and fungal infections. As a result of the high percentage of animals that were not home we recommend the education include an aspect of responsible pet ownership and the importance of keeping your dog enclosed in the yard to prevent car accidents, dog bites, etc. Over the duration of the program, we were able to see the people of the community engaging and observing the veterinary service. We recommend including the schools and providing an opportunity for students to be involved and encouraged in career paths in veterinary service. As the community employment was an essential aspect of the project, we recommend that future projects support opportunities for local employment over the life of the project, inclusive of advertising to the niche community, the clinic days and the follow-up of animals post-surgery. During the course of the evaluation follow-up, we were able to note the pet

owners' appreciation and the benefit to our relationship with the community. Thus we recommend future projects follow the same method of delivery and incorporate the follow-up visits to the home. As it was difficult to keep the project for the target audience, we suggest recording aboriginality on the paperwork completed by the RSPCA on the clinic day.

The future

The future of companion animal health projects in NSW will include seven animal health projects in the 2017/18 financial year in towns with similar demographics, and including some towns included in the 2016 animal health projects. Pet owners who attended the animal health project in 2016 will receive recall notices in the mail to encourage an annual check-up of pets. As a result of the companion animal health projects, our relationship with RSPCA has strengthened; this provides an opportunity for disease data collected to be shared and in turn provides adequate evidence for environmental interventions to the home/yard environment and to underline the importance of public health messaging.

The companion animal health projects in the Brewarrina Shire were well attended by the targeted communities. The success of the project can be attributed to the community involvement from commencement of the project. Information obtained during the initial community meeting regarding the estimated numbers of animals was essential to planning veterinary days in the community. This information was used to ensure there were enough surgical supplies and staff to provide all planned animal health services.

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For more information

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Glossary

AA	Aboriginal Affairs
AEHU	Aboriginal Environmental Health Unit
EH	environmental health
MRSA	methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus
RSPCA	Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals
WNSWLHD	Western New South Wales Local Health District