

Animal hoarding, a lesser-known problem for public health and welfare

This is the first study in Europe on the mental disorder popularly known as animal hoarding

Multidisciplinary action protocols involving different sectors of government are needed

Barcelona, 5th May 2014 – Animal hoarding is a psychiatric disorder that consists of accumulating large numbers of animals at home, usually cats and dogs, without providing them with a minimal standard of care. Researchers from **IMIM (Hospital del Mar Research Institute)** publish the first European study to provide data on this disorder, in the magazine *Animal Welfare*. *The disorder* is still largely unknown and has a negative effect on the health of both the people who suffer from it and the animals involved.

“This is the first step towards public recognition of this disorder, a disorder that constitutes a growing concern for government as it is becoming a serious problem for public health. There are still no standardised action protocols for intervention in these cases” states **Paula Calvo**, a researcher of the IMIM research group on anxiety, affective disorders and schizophrenia and of the “Cátedra Fundación Affinity Animales y Salud” (Affinity Foundation Chair for Animals and Health) of the Department of Psychiatry of the Autonomous University of Barcelona.

Currently, when a case is detected, the animals are removed but no attention is given to the person suffering the disorder. This person does not realise that his or her animals are in poor health and soon begins to hoard them again. Sometimes these animals are found at obvious and critical levels of malnutrition, dehydration and parasitic infestation, with illnesses or uncontrolled breeding, all in a very unhygienic space.

The researchers believe that this disorder has implications for mental health, animal welfare and public health and therefore that recognising its presence in our society is the first step in identifying and detecting cases early and dealing with them in the most efficient possible way. As different sectors must mobilise when a case appears, such as animal protection, public health, public welfare, etc, the group works in conjunction with government, creating multidisciplinary action protocols.

This is the first study to provide data on this syndrome in Europe and it has been possible thanks to the relationships of the researchers with organisations dedicated to the protection of animals. This put them in contact with various cases of the disorder and aroused their interest in the issue. Seeing that there was a vacuum in Europe they decided to contact the National Association of Friends of Animals (ANAA) and to retrospectively analyse the cases that they had collected in their database between 2002 and 2011. They created a questionnaire for the experts who had participated in these cases and all the information that the organisation had available was classified and standardised.

Until now all existing research on the issue has been carried out in the US, Canada and Australia, but with this study it has been demonstrated for the first time that this mental disorder also occurs in Europe

and with similar characteristics. For the time being the data is not sufficient to know the percentage of the population which suffers from the disorder, nor to better understand the profile of those who hoard.

Reference article

Characteristics of 24 cases of animal hoarding in Spain. P Calvo, C Duarte, J Bowen, A Bulbena and J Fatjó. *Animal Welfare*. Doi: 10.7120/09627286.23.2.199.

More information

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