

Compulsive Animal Hoarding

by Catherine Ayers, PhD, ABPP



Animal hoarding is a sorely understudied psychiatric condition that has serious disability and health consequences for animals, individuals who hoard, responders, and community members. This hoarding subtype is characterized by strong urges to save animals, distress from letting go of animals, and the accumulation of more animals than are kept by a typical pet owner. Often the hoarded animals are in poor health, do not receive proper veterinary care or nutrition, and live in small, unsanitary spaces. Many people who hoard animals have limited insight on the impact of their behavior. People who hoard animals are typically not engaged in the mental health system, given limited insight and lack of qualified providers. Cases of animal hoarding are often complex to resolve and require lengthy, multifaceted intervention with long-term follow-up. Unfortunately, there is a high recidivism rate with current community interventions.

critical knowledge gap is avoidable harm to animals and individuals who hoard these animals.

Dr. Catherine Ayers, an Assistant Professor at the University of California, San Diego, along with Dr. Christiana Bratiotis from Boston University and San Diego Veterinarian Brian Evans, DVM, have recently launched an investigation examining the neuropsychiatric features and consequences of animal hoarding. To date, there have been no investigations that evaluate animal hoarders using a comprehensive psychiatric battery as well as assess the impacted animals. A better understanding of the characteristics of animal hoarders and the scope of the problem is the first step to formulating appropriate treatment. This study, the first of its kind, will undoubtedly result in future investigations on community-based treatment interventions.

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The mental health community has long identified hoarding disorder as a discrete syndrome, although it is not a formally listed psychiatric disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). However, in the fifth version of the DSM, slated for release in 2013, hoarding disorder may be categorized as a separate disorder that also carries an animal hoarding subtype. Although animal hoarders meet the basic mental health diagnostic criteria for hoarding disorder, they differ from object hoarders in substantial ways. Animal hoarding cases are more severe, difficult to manage, and resistant to change compared to object hoarding cases. The current psychiatric model of object hoarding may not explain animal hoarding behavior or adequately guide initial intervention and treatment. While there is a fair amount of research on treating individuals who hoard objects, little is known about appropriate treatment for animal hoarding. The consequence of this

Animal welfare organizations and veterinarians have expressed an increased need for education and training given the human, animal, and community consequences of animal hoarding. Signs of animal hoarding include possessing more animals than can be cared for given



available resources, obvious neglect, and contagious diseases in multiple animals. The owners may appear to lack insight into the condition of their animals. Further, they may become defensive when engaged in discussions about how many animals they own and their animals' health problems. Their behaviors are often justified by the belief that they provide superior care than the animals would otherwise receive and a sense of personal responsibility. Veterinarians should consider asking individuals with suspected animal hoarding how many animals they own, resources they have to care for their animals, reasons for having a large number of animals, and if they have had any complaints about the number of

animals they maintain. If a licensed veterinary professional suspects that an animal under his or her care is a victim of animal abuse or cruelty, he or she is required to report this to the appropriate law enforcement authorities, typically the local animal control office (California Business & Professions Code, Section 4830.7).

Dr. Ayers along with a multidisciplinary panel of legal and veterinary experts will be discussing animal hoarding at the upcoming Animal Care Conference on March 6th in Anaheim, California. For questions related to this article and animal hoarding, please contact Dr. Ayers at cayers@ucsd.edu.

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