A description of 17 animal hoarding case files from animal control and a humane society

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ABSTRACT

This study describes 17 publicly available cases of animal hoarding, a special manifestation of hoarding disorder. The cases, which included court documents, animal service documents, photographs, and newspaper clippings, were reviewed by Masters-level clinicians and a veterinarian in private practice. The veterinarian rated the animals in the case files for possible neglect. Over half of the homes had signs of object hoarding. The most commonly hoarded animals were cats, dogs, and rabbits. The majority of animals in the cases reviewed required veterinary care. Individuals with animal hoarding often lack insight about the condition of their animals and require community intervention.

1. Introduction

Hoarding disorder (HD) is characterized by urges to save items and difficulty discarding possessions, excessive clutter levels, and significant distress or impairment (Frost and Hartl, 1996; American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Individuals with HD often have low insight about the effects of their hoarding behaviors (Tolin et al., 2010) and elicit high levels of accommodation from their family members (Vorstenbosch et al., 2015). Hoarding is associated with certain personality traits, including perfectionism, indecision, and procrastination (Timpano et al., 2011), and low levels of self-control (Timpano and Schmidt, 2013) and problem solving (Woody et al., 2014). Individuals with HD often report saving items due to assumed usefulness and emotional attachment (Dozier and Ayers, 2014; Gordon et al., 2013; Nordsletten et al., 2013).

Patronek (1999) defined animal hoarding as owning an excessive number of animals and failing to provide adequate care for the animals. The Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium (HARC) later added denial of one's inability to provide care to animals and urges to accumulate animals as further criteria (HARC, 2002). Over the past two decades, several diagnostic categories have been suggested for animal hoarding, including delusional disorder (Patronek and Nathanson, 2009) and substance use disorders (Lockwood, 1994). Since 2013, animal hoarding has been categorized as a "special manifestation" of hoarding disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Ferreira et al. (2017) have recently suggested that animal hoarding may be a distinct disorder. Paloski et al. (2017) proposed an explanatory model for animal hoarding that included difficulty developing secure attachments in childhood, early life stressors, and decision-making/organizational deficits. Very few treatment-seeking individuals with object hoarding exhibit any signs of animal hoarding (Ung et al., 2017). Compared with individuals who only hoard objects, individuals who hoard animals have poorer insight and live in less sanitary conditions (Ferreira et al., 2017).

Similar to object hoarding, research on animal hoarding suggests that patients tend to be female and unmarried (Ferreira et al., 2017; HARC, 2002; Patronek, 1999). There is little information about other characteristics of these individuals, including their reasons for acquiring and keeping animals. Nearly 100% of homes with individuals who hoard animals are in a state of squalor, and there is often a large accumulation of feces, urine, and animal carcasses (Frost et al., 2011). Of the 71 cases reviewed by HARC, 93% of residential home interiors were unsanitary, while 70% presented fire hazards (HARC, 2002). Such living conditions hold major implications for public health, including

increased risk for infectious disease (Brooks et al., 2013). Animals are typically found to be in poor health and in need of veterinary care (HARC, 2002; Joffe et al., 2014; Reinisch, 2009). A study of 71 animal hoarding cases found that the most commonly hoarded animals were cats (82% of cases), followed by dogs (55%), birds (17%), and small mammals (11%) (HARC, 2002).

There is no single agency dedicated to hoarding cases. Agencies and services such as the health and fire department and the department of aging are typically called to intervene in these circumstances (HARC, 2002; Frost et al., 2011; Patronek, 1999). With there being no standard procedure on handling these cases, animals are simply removed from the individual's home and he/she is typically left without references to treatment for hoarding disorder (Patronek, 1999; Reinisch, 2008). Although there has been little empirical research on recidivism of animal hoarding, researchers estimate the rate of recidivism in animal hoarding cases to be between 50 and 100 percent (Frost et al., 2011; Nathanson, 2009; Reinisch, 2008).

The purpose of the current investigation was to provide a depiction of the presentation of animal hoarding as seen in publicly available cases handled by animal control or humane societies in the United States. Because of the dearth of literature on animal hoarding, an examination of these cases will serve to enrich our understanding of the characteristics of individuals with the animal hoarding and of the animals typically hoarded. We hypothesized that the majority of the cases would exhibit object hoarding in addition to animal hoarding and that the individuals described in the cases would have low insight into their hoarding behaviors.

2. Methods

The protocol of this investigation was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of California, San Diego. Senior authors on the team contacted local animal control or enforcement and inquired if they had any animal hoarding cases or cases with multiple animal involvement that could be reviewed by the team. The sites gave the investigators 17 paper files that involved multiple animals being removed from the home. All paper files were then copied and de-identified. There were no electronic files.

The contents of the 17 publicly available animal abuse case files from the San Diego County Animal Control and the Nebraska Humane Society were reviewed by Masters-level clinicians and a veterinarian in private practice. The case files included a variety of source materials, including court documents (14 cases), animal service documents (11 cases), photographs of the home and/or animals (11 cases), and newspaper clippings about the case (2 cases). The veterinarian rated the animals in the case files on the Tufts Animal Care and Condition (TACC) scales (Patronek, 2000). The Masters-level clinicians reviewed the cases for specific information (e.g., evidence of object hoarding, number of visits to the property). The rating sheet used can be made available upon request. Two clinicians reviewed each case study and then compared their ratings. Any discrepancies were resolved using a third independent rater.

3. Results

Fig. 1 presents brief case summaries of two sample cases. There were an average of 94 animals (SD = 74.47, range = 2–274) in each household. The most commonly hoarded animals were cats (present in 65% of cases), dogs (present in 59% of cases), and rabbits (present in 35% of cases). Other animals hoarded included reptiles (6%), birds (8%), guinea pigs (8%), raccoons (6%), ferrets (6%), and livestock (12%).

Over half (53%) of the homes in the cases reviewed had signs of object hoarding. The case was reported to the authorities most frequently by a neighbor (35%), someone who bought an animal from the home or was a potential buyer (24%), or by an anonymous reporter (24%) (Table 1). The most frequently cited reason for the report was having seen the conditions of the home or of the animals (24%). Twelve of the cases had information about the person's perception of their animal hoarding. Of these 12 individuals, all demonstrated low or absent insight about the situation. The majority of individuals described the reason for their elevated number of animals as either a desire to rescue them (29%) or to keep them as pets (18%). The mean number of visits detailed in each case file was 9.6 (SD = 10.33, range 2–38).

In 76% of the cases all animals were removed and only one case involved no animals removed from the home. No animals that were confiscated were allowed to return to the owner in the majority of cases (73%) and only one individual had all animals returned following the investigation. Veterinary care was needed in 94% of cases and for 70% of animals. Fourteen percent of animals were dead or had to be euthanized. The cost of the investigation (including veterinary care) was only available for six cases. For these cases, the average cost was $20,073.26 (range $499–$40,299.01).

Legal actions were taken in 87% of the cases reviewed. Forty-six percent of individuals had to pay a fine and 35% of individuals were declared a "public nuisance," and 23% of individuals were jailed. Two individuals were evicted from their homes. There was evidence for some sort of referral to mental health care in only two of the cases.

There was some evidence of care (food and water provided and/or history of veterinary care) for the animals in only 29% of cases. On average, animals were very underweight (TACC body condition scale: 4.0, SD = 1.73), were kept in situations deemed dangerous to their health (TACC weather safety scale: 4.5, SD = 0.71; environmental health scale: 3.89, SD = 0.93), and had clear evidence of serious neglect (TACC physical care scale: 4.29, SD = 0.76).

4. Discussion

4.1. Current findings

This study investigated 17 cases of animal hoarding. Consistent with previous research, we found that cats and dogs were the type of animal most frequently hoarded (Paloski et al., 2017). Contrary to our hypothesis, only half of the homes had signs of object hoarding. A recent review of animal hoarding studies concluded that object hoarding was present in all cases in three studies but was present in only half of the cases for four studies (Paloski et al., 2017). Many of the cases analyzed may have involved animal hoarding outside the context of HD or cases of animal neglect, but not hoarding. The high frequency of cases without object hoarding supports the recent assertion by Ferreira et al. (2017) than animal hoarding actually represents a separate diagnostic group from object hoarding.

Consistent with our second hypothesis, the individuals described in the cases had low or absent insight into their hoarding behaviors. The two most frequently cited reasons for hoarding animals (desire to rescue animals and as pets) are further indications of the low levels of insight in individuals with animal hoarding problems. The conditions that the animals were living in were deemed as a serious risk to their health and the majority of animals in the cases reviewed required veterinary care, which is consistent with previous accounts of animal hoarding (HARC, 2002; Joffe et al., 2014; Reinisch, 2009). The lack of ability to notice the state of neglect of animals may be connected to the low levels of insight observed in individuals with animal hoarding (Paloski et al., 2017).

The current investigation found a high rate of recidivism, which is consistent with previous accounts of animal hoarding (Joffe et al., 2014; Brooks et al., 2013; Reinisch, 2008). The high recidivism of animal hoarding is not unexpected due to the low levels of insight exhibited by the individuals. Only two of the 17 cases reviewed had evidence that the individuals were referred for mental health services, which is not unexpected given that the officials who handle cases of animal hoarding often have little training in how to deal with such
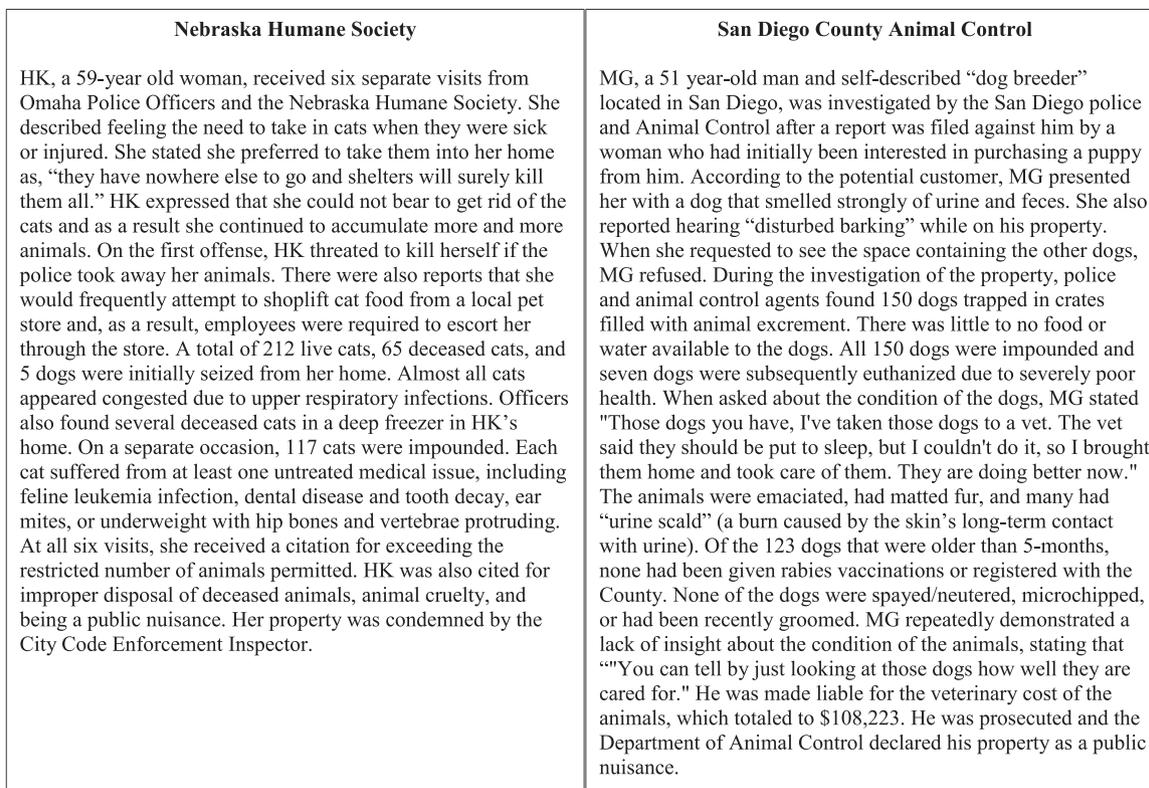
Nebraska Humane Society	**San Diego County Animal Control**
HK, a 59-year old woman, received six separate visits from Omaha Police Officers and the Nebraska Humane Society. She described feeling the need to take in cats when they were sick or injured. She stated she preferred to take them into her home as, "they have nowhere else to go and shelters will surely kill them all." HK expressed that she could not bear to get rid of the cats and as a result she continued to accumulate more and more animals. On the first offense, HK threated to kill herself if the police took away her animals. There were also reports that she would frequently attempt to shoplift cat food from a local pet store and, as a result, employees were required to escort her through the store. A total of 212 live cats, 65 deceased cats, and 5 dogs were initially seized from her home. Almost all cats appeared congested due to upper respiratory infections. Officers also found several deceased cats in a deep freezer in HK's home. On a separate occasion, 117 cats were impounded. Each cat suffered from at least one untreated medical issue, including feline leukemia infection, dental disease and tooth decay, ear mites, or underweight with hip bones and vertebrae protruding. At all six visits, she received a citation for exceeding the restricted number of animals permitted. HK was also cited for improper disposal of deceased animals, animal cruelty, and being a public nuisance. Her property was condemned by the City Code Enforcement Inspector.	MG, a 51 year-old man and self-described "dog breeder" located in San Diego, was investigated by the San Diego police and Animal Control after a report was filed against him by a woman who had initially been interested in purchasing a puppy from him. According to the potential customer, MG presented her with a dog that smelled strongly of urine and feces. She also reported hearing "disturbed barking" while on his property. When she requested to see the space containing the other dogs, MG refused. During the investigation of the property, police and animal control agents found 150 dogs trapped in crates filled with animal excrement. There was little to no food or water available to the dogs. All 150 dogs were impounded and seven dogs were subsequently euthanized due to severely poor health. When asked about the condition of the dogs, MG stated "Those dogs you have, I've taken those dogs to a vet. The vet said they should be put to sleep, but I couldn't do it, so I brought them home and took care of them. They are doing better now." The animals were emaciated, had matted fur, and many had "urine scald" (a burn caused by the skin's long-term contact with urine). Of the 123 dogs that were older than 5-months, none had been given rabies vaccinations or registered with the County. None of the dogs were spayed/neutered, microchipped, or had been recently groomed. MG repeatedly demonstrated a lack of insight about the condition of the animals, stating that ""You can tell by just looking at those dogs how well they are cared for." He was made liable for the veterinary cost of the animals, which totaled to $108,223. He was prosecuted and the Department of Animal Control declared his property as a public nuisance.

Fig. 1. Summary of two animal hoarding cases.

Table 1
Characteristics of original animal hoarding cases.

Source		*n*	%
	Animal control	1	5.88
	Anonymous	4	23.53
	Buyer	4	23.53
	Friend	1	6.88
	Neighbor	6	35.29
	Police officer	1	5.88
Reason for complaint		*n*	%
	Heard barking	1	5.88
	Saw conditions	4	23.53
	Smell	3	17.65
	Unknown	9	52.94
Reason for animal hoarding		*n*	%
	Breeder	1	5.88
	Pets	3	17.65
	Religious convictions	1	5.88
	Rescue	5	29.41
	Watching animals for friends	1	5.88
	Unknown	6	35.29
Evidence of care of animals		*n*	%
	Fresh food and water	1	5.88
	Medicine	1	5.88
	Animals in clean cages	1	5.88
	Records of veterinary care	2	11.76
	None	12	70.59

cases (Nathanson, 2009).

4.2. Strengths and limitations

This study contributes to the extant literature about the presentation of animal hoarding in the community through the presentation of cases from two regions of the United States, southern California and Nebraska. The study further benefited from the use of a veterinarian to review the cases. There are several major limitations to the current study, including the low sample size and the lack of access to the individuals in the cases. Due to the latter limitation, it is uncertain whether the cases describe animal hoarding as a manifestation of psychopathology or merely cases of severe animal neglect.

4.3. Conclusion

Animal hoarding is costly to the community and requires considerable monetary and work force resources. Future work should look at procedures to quickly and effectively intervene in animal hoarding cases while making appropriate referrals for mental health treatment.

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Supplementary materials

Supplementary material associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at doi:10.1016/j.psychres.2018.12.127.

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