

# Animal hoarding – prevalence, causes and case management

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**DAVID BAILEY, LOUISE MACLEOD** highlight the mental and physical issues faced by humans associated with this compulsive disorder that can often lead to unnecessary animal suffering

## Summary

Hoarding of animals is a problem veterinary surgeons have to occasionally deal with. While the animals suffer in a hoarding event, the real problem is with the mental illness of the hoarders, and vets are often ill prepared and unwilling to act as de facto social workers when confronted with these cases. Successful outcomes (often meaning the medical treatment and rehoming of animals, prosecution of the hoarder and treatment of their mental illness) of animal hoarding cases require a coordinated approach between many different professions and authorities. Unfortunately, many animal hoarders fall between the gap that exists between animal welfare, legal science and social services.

## Key words

animal hoarding, mental health, animal welfare

**HOARDING (of living and non-living objects) is a surprisingly prevalent condition in the western world.**

Two to five per cent of the UK population<sup>1</sup> are thought to exist as hoarders – that is, up to three million people in the UK – which makes the condition twice as prevalent as obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and four times as prevalent as bipolar disorder and schizophrenia<sup>2</sup>

Affected individuals were previously referred to as collectors, and it wasn't until 10 years ago that the first systematic studies of hoarding were undertaken. Since then, studies have been published that challenge the way hoarders have traditionally been viewed, although it still appears to be an under-recognised problem.

The majority of these people will be hoarding inanimate objects, but animal hoarding is becoming more widely recognised and it is observed that many hoarders are unable to distinguish between inanimate and living objects.

## A wider problem

The impact of animal hoarding on animal welfare is clear, but the collected animals are a symptom of a much wider problem encompassing areas of the mental and physical health of the hoarder, their family and established social network.

The risks to the physical health of the inhabitants of the hoarder's house, including animals, owners and in-contact members of the public (for example, service workers, health professionals and vets) come from increased ammonia levels in the house (due to increased levels of urine and faeces), zoonotic diseases, risks of injury from un-socialised animals and damaged property.

In an extreme case, one of the authors (David Bailey) was called to a property in an isolated region of the UK where an animal collector had 12 living dogs and more than 300 porcelain statuettes of dogs, as well as photos and other dog-related paraphernalia ([Figure 1](#)).

The owner had fallen on accumulated dog faeces ([Figure 2](#)) and, due to his overweight condition and poor physical health, became embedded in the dog faeces and unable to get up. The owner had developed gangrene in one of his feet and his dogs – having not been fed for a few days – began to consume his toes without his knowledge.

The dogs were seized and the owner had to have his leg amputated after the event.

## Definition

Animal hoarding is defined by the keeping of larger than usual numbers of animals, without having the ability to properly care for them and at the same time, denying this inability<sup>3</sup>.

It is often linked to a syndrome in humans called Diogenes syndrome, where affected individuals exhibit self-neglect, extreme squalor, apathy, social withdrawal and hoarding.

Animals are often not provided with basic needs such as adequate nutrition, space, shelter and medical care. In addition, they are normally poorly socialised with parasitic diseases and untreated wounds. These are cases of unnecessary suffering and often cruelty, but, surprisingly, many will go

undetected for extended periods of time, sometimes never being resolved.

Gary Patronek of Tufts University concluded the majority of animal hoarders were older, single females living alone and often isolated (the stereotypical cat lady).

However, the condition is seen in all ages (first signs can sometimes be seen during teenage years), in both sexes, in couples/families and across generations. It has been observed in unemployed people and in people from a wide range of professions (including vets) from both urban and rural settings<sup>4</sup>. The most common species involved are companion animals, but cases involving exotics, wildlife and farm animals are not uncommon<sup>5, 6</sup> ([Table 1](#)).

## Causes

There are different ways in which animal hoarding develops, with crossover possible between them. The most commonly identified are overwhelmed caregivers who are passively acquiring animals, rescuers who are actively acquiring animals and exploiters who are acquiring animals to serve their own needs.

It is also recognised there are incipient hoarders, who are people just beginning to become unable to care for the number of animals they have (but denying this) and breeder hoarders who have unneutered animals and can't or won't part with any offspring<sup>7, 8</sup>.

The result is always unnecessary animal suffering, with the original intention of the hoarder largely irrelevant, and this is reflected in judicial sentencing guidelines for these types of offences.

As courts cannot advise individuals to seek psychological counselling, the judicial reply to hoarders seems summary and possibly lacks deterrence, as recidivism among hoarders is highly likely.

## Symptoms

Common to all animal hoarders is some degree of mental illness and, as with most mental illness, there is a wide spectrum of severity, which is likely to correlate with the degree of hoarding.

*The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* is published by the American Psychiatric Association and provides standard criteria for the classification of mental disorders. Hoarding was previously listed in this as a symptom of OCD, although hoarders do not experience traits such as intrusive recurring thoughts, images or impulses (that is, obsessions) or repetitive behaviours or mental acts (that is, compulsions)<sup>9</sup>.

The severity of OCD tends to fluctuate over time, but hoarding tends to get progressively worse<sup>10</sup>. MRI studies have shown different brain activity patterns between people with OCD who also hoard and other OCD patients – particularly when faced with decisions regarding sorting and discarding

items. This type of research may eventually lead to developing biomarkers for hoarding disorders.

The conclusion that OCD and hoarding are neurologically distinct<sup>11</sup> has led to hoarding now being viewed as a completely separate condition, albeit being very closely related to many other mental health disorders.

The most common disorders co-existing with hoarding are OCD, depression, social anxiety and dementia. Twenty-five to 40 per cent of people with OCD are thought to have symptoms of compulsive hoarding<sup>2</sup>.

The fifth edition of the *DSM* – published on May 18, 2013 – has for the first time listed hoarding disorder as a new diagnosis. The World Health Organisation publication *The International Classification of Diseases (ICD)* – which is the standard diagnostic tool for epidemiology, health management and clinical purpose – is also very likely to include this in its next 11th edition, due in 2015. This will hopefully lead to more funding and research on the subject of hoarding.

Some people have developed hoarding compulsions after sustaining brain injury and there appears to be a genetic basis, with hoarding inherited as a recessive trait (interestingly, OCD traits seem to be dominant, further separating these conditions)<sup>10</sup>.

Some psychologists believe hoarders are animal addicts and there are some common behavioural traits between them and drug or substance abusers.

## Management

Quite often, animal hoarding cases are left to animal welfare organisations to resolve through prosecution for cruelty to animals, but the mental health of the hoarder can be left unaddressed and relapses following seizure of animals and prosecution is nearly 100 per cent, without intervention<sup>7</sup>.

This is a complicated problem and there is a fragmented approach to addressing it. Prosecution definitely has its place, but courts are limited in their ability to deal effectively with hoarders, vets can be reluctant to tackle mental health issues and social workers and mental health workers often don't want to interfere with an animal-related problem.

Successful prosecutions of animal hoarders can result in a ban on keeping animals, but this can be difficult to enforce. Very little legislation concerning animal hoarding specifically is available, and it is an area the US has made some progress in.

Since 2001, Illinois has had mandatory counselling for people meeting their legal definition of a "companion animal hoarder" and Hawaii had a law passed in 2008 outlawing animal hoarding<sup>14</sup>. In Oregon, a shelter licence is required for anyone owning more than 10 pets. They are then subject

to inspections, which could alert professionals early on if hoarding was developing.

## Increasing awareness

Potentially, only five per cent of compulsive hoarders come to the attention of professionals<sup>13</sup>, although this is likely to be higher in cases involving animals as noise, objectionable smells and ammonia levels will be more noticeable.

Public education has a large part to play in increasing this figure and awareness and interest has grown, with television shows such as Channel 4's *Obsessive Compulsive Hoarder*, *The Hoarder Next Door* and *The Horse Hoarder*, as well as BBC One's *A Life of Grime* and *Britain's Biggest Hoarders*.

Service workers, and community health workers in particular, regularly have access to people's homes and would be more likely to report a problem if a set framework for reporting was in place. People are likely to ignore issues unless it is obvious to whom the problem should be reported.

As vets in first-opinion practice, we may also be some of the first people to witness a problem developing and our role should initially be to care for the animals, with investigative habits to follow up. This will involve attempting to confirm that there is a true case of animal hoarding and also accurately recording any details of home visits and animal treatments; taking photographs can be a very useful tool.

If you are concerned, then reporting the problem, assisting in the safe removal of animals when needed, giving appropriate medical care (euthanasia is unfortunately frequently required) and being prepared to go to court if necessary are also actions we are professionally and morally obliged to take.

Reporting should involve talking to welfare organisations and police; however, it is advised that – prior to breaching any client confidentiality – the RCVS should be consulted. In a case of suspected unnecessary animal suffering, client confidentiality can be breached under certain circumstances.

Vets have an ethical duty to report any suspicion of non-accidental injury, but this falls short of mandatory reporting, which is a requirement for vets in some US states.

## Conclusion

Animal hoarding is a complicated problem and a coordinated approach is essential, as many different areas need to be involved for a successful long-term outcome.

Cooperation between people from different disciplines (vets, rescue centres, police, psychiatrists,

social workers, mental health charities and environmental health) can work well, as seen to some extent with the US-based National Link Coalition<sup>12</sup> in the field of non-accidental injury.

Increasing public awareness and ongoing research into the condition of hoarding will help with identifying and treating the disease, but mandatory reporting of suspected animal cruelty would be a valuable first step.

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**Figure 1.** A bedroom of a hoarder. A living animal in the centre appears to have an injury on its shoulder, while other animals in the room are non-living statuettes and featured in all rooms of the house. The photo lacks detail and clarity due to the amount of ammonia in the environment causing condensation on the camera lens. This obscured the view and is evidential in value.

IMAGE: Copyright David Bailey.



**Figure 2.** This spare room is characterised by faeces covering the entire floor. Living in extreme squalor is a feature of some hoarders and associated with Diogenes syndrome.

IMAGE: Copyright David Bailey.



Species	Percentage
Cats	81.7%
Dogs	54.9%
Birds	16.9%
Small mammals	11.3%
Cattle/sheep/ goats	5.6%
Horses	5.6%
Reptiles	5.6%

**Table 1.** Species frequency seen in animal hoarding