

## Looking at Declawing Through New Lens

Moral discomfort trumped by social framework at feline veterinary hospital

The scientific literature is full of studies on the technical pros and cons of declawing, but a University of Wisconsin researcher has reexamined the practice through a decidedly stickier lens: the complex arena of human attitudes and morality. Published under the title “Death or Declaw: Dealing with Moral Ambiguity in a Veterinary Hospital” (*Society & Animals*, Vol. 13, Issue 4), the study by Dana Atwood-Harvey included nine months of ethnographic fieldwork in a feline veterinary hospital and interviews with 11 staff members.

The hospital’s policy was to provide declawing upon request. Although the owner, a veterinarian, did not feel that this medical procedure was “ideal,” he deferred to his clients and chose to refrain from making any recommendations for or against the surgery. But a number of staff members expressed discomfort with declawing and with their participation, whether direct or indirect, in such procedures. The resulting discrepancy between personal values and occupational demands was bridged by two primary strategies, the author concluded: collective accounting schemes and organizational support structures.

Collective accounting schemes, in which respondents asserted that moral judgments about declawing should be informed by the degree of suffering, the client’s motivation, and the situation, enabled staff participants to rationalize the procedure and displace blame. For example, the front declawing of kittens, particularly when combined with neutering, was considered to be the most legitimate context because of the comparatively short duration of post-surgical pain and healing. Other situations in which declawing was perceived as relatively justified included those in which owners faced housing restrictions or harbored concern for the safety of vulnerable family members.

The declawing of adult cats was viewed as more problematic because of its perceived potential to cause greater physical and emotional trauma, as well as an increased risk of unwanted behaviors such as biting. Furthermore, the staff observed a number of declawed patients who were brought back to the hospital after getting outside and sustaining injuries. The owners of these cats were often denounced in private conversation, as were those who requested declawing in order to protect furniture.

Organizational support structures in the form of specific scripts provided by the hospital’s owner also allowed employees to distance themselves from their own moral agency. These scripts were used in response to client inquiries about declawing. The shorter script—“We don’t encourage it or discourage it / It is up to the client to decide”—was the expected response if a cat owner asked whether the hospital recommended declawing. A longer, conversational script could be employed for customers who were particularly inquisitive, and this approach allowed staff to gradually introduce additional medical information, but only as much as was requested. For example, a staff person might explain that declawing involves a removal of the claws at the nail bed, similar to removing the first knuckle of a finger. These scripts removed the challenge of deciding what and how much to explain and allowed staff to separate their professional role and personal beliefs.

The author concludes that situational and structural factors limit the degree to which people act on their own conscience. And in a perhaps unexpected way, the study also suggests that people who participate in the practice of declawing may actually share a number of the same concerns expressed by declaw opponents when the invisible yet powerful constraints of the workplace are explored.

—Hillary Twining

Feline overwhelmed on your current kennel project...

We can help.



Consider hiring the kennel engineering specialists.

- Indoor Air Quality
- Mechanical • Plumbing
- Noise Control
- Electrical

Call us toll free  
866.DLI.7078

**Design Learned** Inc.  
Specialists in Animal  
Care Facility Engineering  
[www.designlearned.com](http://www.designlearned.com)