REVISED POLICY ON DECLAWING OF DOMESTIC CATS

RESOLVED, that the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) adopt the revised policy on Declawing of Domestic Cats as noted below (additions are underlined, deletions are struck through).

Declawing of Domestic Cats
The AVMA strongly encourages client education prior to consideration of onychectomy (declawing). It is the obligation of the veterinarian to provide cat owners with a complete education with regard to the normal scratching behavior of cats, the procedure itself, as well as potential risks to the patient. Onychectomy is an amputation and should be regarded as a major surgery. Declawing of domestic cats should be considered only after attempts have been made to prevent the cat from using its claws destructively or when its clawing presents an above normal health/zoonotic risk for its owner(s).

The AVMA believes it is the obligation of veterinarians to provide cat owners with complete education with regard to feline onychectomy. The following points are the foundation for full understanding and disclosure regarding declawing:

- **Surgical declawing is not a medically necessary procedure for the cat in most cases.** While rare in occurrence, there are inherent risks and complications with any surgical procedure including, but not limited to, anesthetic complications, hemorrhage, infection, and pain. If surgical onychectomy is performed, appropriate use of safe and effective anesthetics and perioperative analgesics for an appropriate length of time are imperative. Pain management is necessary (not elective) and required for this procedure. Multimodal pain management is recommended, and there should be a written aftercare plan. The surgical alternative of tendonectomy is not recommended.

- Scratching is a normal feline behavior, is a means for cats to mark their territory both visually and with scent, and is used for claw conditioning ("husk" removal) and stretching activity.

- Owners should provide suitable implements for normal scratching behavior. Examples are scratching posts, cardboard boxes, lumber or logs, and carpet or fabric remnants affixed to stationary objects. Implements should be tall or long enough to allow full stretching, and be firmly anchored to provide necessary resistance to scratching. Cats should be positively reinforced in the use of these implements.

- Appropriate claw care (consisting of trimming the claws every 1 to 2 weeks) should be provided to prevent injury or damage to household items.

- **Temporary synthetic nail caps are available as an alternative to onychectomy to prevent human injury or damage to property.** Plastic nail caps are usually applied every 4 to 6 weeks.

- Declawed cats should be housed indoors and allowed outside only under direct supervision.

- Scientific data do indicate that cats that have destructive scratching behavior are more likely to be euthanatized, or more readily relinquished, released, or abandoned, thereby contributing to the homeless cat population. Where scratching behavior is an issue as to whether or not a particular cat can remain as an acceptable household pet in a particular home, surgical onychectomy may be considered.

- There is no scientific evidence that declawing leads to behavioral abnormalities when the behavior of declawed cats is compared with that of cats in control groups.
Statement about the Resolution

The policy on Declawing of Domestic Cats was originally drafted by the Animal Welfare Committee (AWC) and approved by the Executive Board in 2003. It was last amended in 2009, and was reviewed by the AWC during its March 2014 meeting in accord with the at least every-five-year review requirement for AVMA policies.

Substantive revisions being recommended include:

- Clarification that onychectomy is an amputation of all or part of the distal phalanx of the cat’s paw and, accordingly, is a major surgical procedure for the cat.

- Acknowledgment that, in addition to potential zoonotic disease transmission, cats with claws may present increased risks of other injury/morbidity for certain owners (i.e., revision of “zoonotic risk” to “health risk”). Examples of such owners include those whose skin integrity may be compromised (e.g., elderly, those with compromised circulation, diabetics) or those who are immunocompromised. The revised statement also cautions that such risks should not be generalized to the human population at large, but should be considered on a case-by-case basis (i.e., “above normal health risk”).

- Recognition that, while claws do contribute to the ability of cats to defend themselves from various threats, cats that are declawed may be safely allowed outdoors if they are appropriately supervised.

Editorial revisions are also being recommended to the policy. These move information regarding the need for client education regarding the procedure to the beginning of the policy and move information regarding risks of the procedure for cats to the beginning of the list of bulleted points for understanding and disclosure.

A topical subcommittee was appointed to review the policy and make recommendations to the AWC. The representative from the American Association of Feline Practitioners representative served as the subcommittee lead, with a representative from the American Animal Hospital Association also serving on the subcommittee. The language of the revised policy is consistent with existing policies of the American Association of Feline Practitioners and the American Animal Hospital Association. The topical subcommittee’s recommendations were supported by the AWC. The Executive Board recommends approval of the revised policy.

Financial Impact: None

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