

Pets: The voiceless victims of the COVID-19 crisis

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The World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) has advised that "to date, there is no evidence that companion animals can spread the disease." Credit: Shutterstock

Reports of companion animals starving or being killed as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak highlight the vulnerable existence animals endure at the whim of humans.

The plight of [companion animals](#) such as cats and [dogs](#) has become an emerging animal rights issue since the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, with reports of abandoned [animals](#) in the Chinese city of Wuhan now starving or being killed.

Closer to home, there have been reports of Sydney vets being approached by pet owners, asking to have dogs put to death, out of concern the dog might bring coronavirus into the home.

"These are virus-free, healthy animals, and there is no reason to believe that dogs are able to pass the virus onto humans, or that dogs have passed the virus on to humans," says Dr. Siobhan O'Sullivan, an animal welfare expert from UNSW's Faculty of

Arts and Social Sciences.

"Yet, even if this were true—which it is not—there are clearly more ethical ways to respond to the issue."

Advice from the World Organisation for Animal Health

The World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) has advised that "to date, there is no evidence that companion animals can spread the disease. Therefore, there is no justification in taking measures against companion animals which may compromise their welfare. There is no evidence that dogs play a role in the spread of this human disease or that they become sick. Further studies are needed to understand if and how different animals could be affected by COVID-19 virus."

The OIE will continue to provide [updates](#) as new information becomes available.

Dr. O'Sullivan is hoping these incidents of pet owners approaching vets to unnecessarily euthanise their dogs are isolated cases. She also hopes vets who are approached with such requests will take the time to educate their clients, for the sake of the animals.

"What this speaks to, in my view, is the relative disposability of non-human animals, in the minds of some people," Dr. O'Sullivan says.

Dr. O'Sullivan says with the recent Australian bushfire crisis, people dedicated themselves to saving animals. Meanwhile, at the other end of the spectrum, some people are now making the rash decision to kill a companion animal (or seek to have them killed) because they mistakenly believe the animal might introduce a virus into the home.

She says the COVID-19 crisis highlights the vulnerable existence animals endure at the whim of humans.

"I am yet to hear of an influx of animals to pounds and the RSPCA. But, if people are thinking of dumping their animals, as opposed to having them killed, they need to be aware that many animals that find their way to the pound will be killed. Sending your animal to a shelter is as good as having them killed, in many cases."

Owning a companion animal is a life-long commitment

Dr. O'Sullivan says that, in the long term, educating pet owners is critically important. She also suggests that we perhaps need to be more selective in who can enjoy the company of a companion animal.

"Living with animals has been shown to generate many benefits for humans. They bring companionship, assist with exercise, are cute, loving and adorable. But, if humans are to enjoy the company of animals, they need to make a lifelong commitment. It should not be permissible to simply kill an animal once the going gets tough or at least when it is perceived to be. This is a lifelong commitment."

It's important for all people with companion animals to have an emergency management plan in place all the time, not just in times of crisis.

"This includes how you will evacuate the animals in case of fire, [or] who will feed the animals in case you are in an accident, hospitalised or delayed. There are many online dog and cat feeding providers. Your local vet may also be able to recommend suitable carers."

Dr. O'Sullivan says simply building strong networks—including your neighbours—is a good idea when it comes to an emergency care plan for animals.

Provided by University of New South Wales

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