

DECLAWING

Declawing is the practice of surgically removing the claws of a cat whilst the cat is under general anaesthetic. The procedure is usually carried out at the request of the owner who may have been experiencing "anti-social behaviour" by the cat such as scratching furniture. Declawing is legal. But in the UK and more than 20 other countries, declawing is either illegal or acceptable only under extreme circumstances. There are no definitive studies to answer the questions of whether it is ethical or humane but the NSPCA believes it is neither of the above.

"Technically referred to as an onychectomy, the procedure resembles more of amputation than a declaw. Cats' claws are closely adhered to the bone, so removing them requires taking away the last bones of the toes, along with all ten frontal tendons and nerves. It's a process that many liken to the removal of a human fingertip at the first knuckle – and that has often been blamed for house-soiling, biting and other changes in behaviour. While laser surgery is said to be preferable because of reduced bleeding and pain in the post-operative period, researchers have found that long-term implications remain the same for both laser and scalpel operations." (Humane Society of the United States – ANIMAL SHELTERING magazine, May / June 2004).

One conundrum with no obvious answer but with serious and long-term implications for SPCAs country-wide is: – Does declawing lead to more felines being handed over as a result of changes in their behaviour that occur after declawing when a cat's natural defences have been taken away? Or does declawing not lead to more cats being handed in at SPCAs when intolerant owners get fed up with damage to their belongings? It may be the case that owners who have their cats declawed may have a low tolerance for damage to property or other problems (perhaps read "natural behaviour") caused by pets.

A September 2002 publication **WHY CATS NEED CLAWS** by Gary Loewenthal describes not only the pain of the procedure but also the possible balance problems that may result. "When the cat begins standing differently to compensate for the loss of part of his toes, and the weakening of the shoulders and upper back that some people believe develops when a cat can no longer scratch properly."

Safety is an important factor to consider

too. Cats rely on their claws to get out of danger when, for example, being chased by a dog and being able to shimmy up the nearest tree. A cat that has had claws and then has them removed will instinctively act in the way it has previously when frightened or attacked. That's right, by using its claws. Cats use them to grip a surface as they leap to safety or to use as the first line of defence when confronted by an unfriendly member of another or even the same species. It is a literal truth that declawed cats are defenceless. The "pro-declaw" brigade then say that declawed cats must be kept indoors. We ask if you think that, in itself, is fair. We add that accidents and dangers may also lurk indoors but a declawed cat has no option of a leap to safety.

There is a "last resort" argument but it has to be asked how often declawing really is performed as a final measure only after all other options have been tried. It is entirely



possible that there may be owners and veterinarians who might consider surgery a routine preventive rather than a desperate intervention. Perhaps we should focus on the alternatives.

They do exist.

Scratching is a normal feline behaviour. It is a means for claw conditioning ("husk" removal) and stretching activity. Owners need to provide suitable implements for normal scratching behaviour such as scratching posts, cardboard boxes, logs with carpet or fabric remnants attached. Scratching equipment needs to be tall or long enough to allow full stretching and be firmly anchored to provide the necessary resistance to scratching. It's no wonder we hear "He doesn't use his scratching post" when so very often, the post moves around when a cat uses it or, worse still, has fallen over on occasion. I'd be wary too! Cats should be positively reinforced for using scratching equipment. That is, praise, fuss and attention for using them. Ironically, scolding a cat for failing to use scratching equipment serves to reinforce the very behaviour you are trying to stop. The cat is getting attention. Cats aren't fools either. They soon learn how to grab your attention so make sure that behaviour you fully approve of is the way your attention will be grabbed. Placing or rubbing catnip on the area you want your cat to scratch is a good way of attracting kitty in the right direction.

A flashy product that is rapidly gaining attention in the fight against declawing is **Soft Paws**. These are bright vinyl claw caps that allow kitties to scratch without doing damage. There was initial scepticism in the United States but recent feedback is that the product is easy to use and a far better alternative to claw removal.

A lower-maintenance, more self-explanatory product is Sticky Paws. These are transparent self-adhesive strips that can be applied to furniture, to any household items, in fact. They are harmless to the fabric / material and to the cats. They are a deterrent to the cats, sending the cat back to where it should have been scratching in the first place; the scratching post. They are humane. Availability in South Africa may be questionable or very limited but an enterprising individual could easily come up with a home-made version that would do the trick. A protective layer around vulnerable spots in the house that can easily be removed when visitors arrive is not a bad option to take.

No matter, we cannot evade a definition of "last option" or to give definition to the word "unnecessary" in the NSPCA Statement of Policy. Declawing might be justified if the cat's scratching posed a zoonotic risk to the owner. (Zoonosis is the passing of a disease from

animal to man.) **The definition might stretch as far as being acceptable in cases where otherwise a cat may be euthanased or denied a home.**



It is a documented fact that many people hand in cats at SPCAs because they have scratched furniture or other household items. The "last resort" argument lives on. But a 1994 report (VET FORUM, "Declawing revisited" by

G M Landsberg) describes a "serious disconnect" between the perceptions of veterinarians and the perceptions of cat owners regarding declawing. A survey is cited in which 50% of veterinarians responding speculated that cat owners would have handed their cats to the local animal welfare organisation, had the cats not been declawed. In fact, 4% of those owners said they would have made that choice.