

On the Positive Side: Clarification of rabies vaccination sought

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A renewed interest in rabies vaccination for New Mexico cats and dogs seeks to provide clarification to the regulation as written, while completely remaining in the spirit of the existing law. What is sought are exemption waivers to be provided by licensed veterinarians for ill dogs and cats until such time as they can be declared healthy enough to be vaccinated.

This clarification would provide better protection for the health of our companion animals and the public. The current policy, as stated by Dave Fly, DVM, state veterinarian with the New Mexico Livestock Board, reads, "Dogs and cats over the age of three months shall be vaccinated against rabies. The animal shall receive a booster within the 12-month interval following the initial vaccination. Every domestic dog and cat shall be revaccinated against rabies within 12 months if a 1-year vaccine is administered or within 36 months if a 3-year vaccine is administered with a rabies vaccine licensed by the United States Department of Agriculture and administered according to label recommendations."

The guide for New Mexico's vaccination policy is to be found on the label printed on every dose of vaccine, although it is not explicitly repeated in the regulation or currently part of the wording of the law. The clarification being sought is actually printed on the vaccine label and states that the vaccines are for "the vaccination of healthy cats, dogs ..."

The restriction on the animal's health is an important one, which may sometimes be overlooked in an attempt to vaccinate every animal. There is serious concern that vaccination of a dog and cat with medical conditions may jeopardize the life and well being of the cat or dog. There is also a possibility that the vaccine may fail to elicit the appropriate immune response in an unhealthy animal, and that appropriate immune response is necessary for public safety.

For these reasons, pet owners across the state are seeking official clarification to the regulation so that exemption waivers can be provided by licensed veterinarians for ill dogs and cats until such time as they can be declared healthy enough to be vaccinated.

One concerned pet owner stated, "Those of us in New Mexico who own dogs or cats consider them an important member of our families. They are a treasured and extremely important part of our lives. No animal owner in N.M. should be forced by our state to risk their pet's life if a veterinarian has determined that a vaccination would put it in jeopardy."

A recent statewide survey of New Mexico veterinarians (with a very respectable research response rate of 37 percent) covered a wide range of rabies vaccination concerns. The data indicated that awareness and concern about these issues may not be keen with the ambiguity of the regulation language. In this study 45 percent of the respondents were against rabies vaccine waivers, 37 percent were for waivers and 20 percent were undecided.

Other states that currently have medical exemption clauses in their rabies laws include Alabama, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Maine, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Vermont, Virginia and Wisconsin. California is in the process of addressing this issue; we hope that New Mexico will move in that direction.

Frank Bryce is president of the Humane Society of Southern New Mexico.