



## HIGH-VOLUME, LOW-COST SPAY/NEUTER CLINICS

The information provided in this Report was obtained through an interview ISAR conducted with W Marvin Mackie, DVM, a consultant specializing in high-volume spay/neuter clinics. Dr. Mackie opened his first spay/neuter clinic in 1976 and currently heads four high-volume, low-cost spay/neuter clinics in Southern California. Dr. Mackie's very successful "Animal Birth Control Clinics" altered a combined total of 25,315 cats and dogs in 1998 alone.

### Background

After receiving his Doctor of Veterinary Medicine Degree from Washington State University in 1963, Dr. Mackie spent 13 years in private practice, performing relief work for veterinarians who wanted time off. His working experience in more than 35 clinics throughout California allowed him to gain extraordinary insight in the various ways of clinical operations and fostered an innovative way of thinking that ultimately resulted in his developing his own system of extreme spay/neuter efficiency which he now shares with others.

### The Successful High-Volume Spay/Neuter Clinic

Dr. Mackie's clinics average 40 surgeries each operating day. He attributes the high number of spay/neuter surgeries his clinics are able to perform to the fact that the clinics are considered "well animal clinics," offering essentially only one service: sterilization (although they also provide vaccinations, deworming, and ear mite treatments). Whereas a traditional veterinary hospital must be prepared to provide a wide variety of services each day, a specialized spay/neuter clinic can focus its efforts entirely on perfecting and streamlining only one task.

Dr. Mackie emphasizes the need for extraordinary efficiency in every aspect of a successful high-volume clinic. Noting that the proficiency of the clinic is predicated on the slowest link in the chain, he stresses the necessity of a motivated staff that's willing to work as a team, communicates very well, and has a dedication to the purpose of the clinic. He encourages his staff to "work daily with the passion of preparing for a hurricane."

Despite his emphasis on speed, Dr. Mackie stresses that it's imperative for the veterinarians to do a good job and that the clinics earn a good reputation. He expects excellence and strives for perfection with each surgery performed in his clinics.

Dr. Mackie's clinics clearly fulfill his Mission Statement, which reads, "Our Mission ... To develop and promote a reproducible, financially and medically sound, consistently excellent surgical system to effectively respond to the pet overpopulation problem through surgical sterilization by private sector veterinarians." Having developed a protocol for a successful clinic, Dr. Mackie is eager to assist others in establishing similar programs.

### **Clinic Operations**

To remain economically viable, the clinic must maintain operations in accordance with the volume of spay/neuter surgeries supported by the community in which it operates. Therefore, the personnel and facility requirements, as well as the hours and days the clinic is open, will depend largely on community size.

Dr. Mackie's clinics in the major metropolitan areas are open 11 days in 2 weeks, including every other Saturday. His clinics in the outlying areas that serve the smaller communities can't support the same kind of volume, so they're open only one or two days a week. In 1998, Dr. Mackie's four clinics were open a combined total of 641 surgery days.

Due to the expense of advertising, Dr. Mackie's clinics rely primarily on word of mouth to gain clients. Also, various organizations such as animal shelters and rescue leagues utilize his clinics' services and constitute a notable portion of their business.

### **Determining Fees for Spay/Neuter Surgeries**

Dr. Mackie recommends that clinics base the spay/neuter surgery fee on the breakeven point of unsubsidized operations. The price per surgery is determined by totaling the fair market value of everything necessary to provide the service and then dividing by the estimated number of surgeries the clinic will perform. Dr. Mackie notes that to achieve a realistic portrayal of the value of services, all subsidization (whether it is financial, through volunteer work, or by the donation of facility/equipment/supplies) should be considered at its fair market value when determining fees.

Dr. Mackie suggests that clinics strive for a fee that will move people to action; he recommends a target fee of approximately 60% below the average local cost. His clinics charge \$35 for a cat spay, a substantial reduction from the \$100 local average charged by private veterinarians for the same service.

We feel it's significant to note that Dr. Mackie's clinics are self-sustaining; they receive no subsidization aside from the fees paid by those who use the services. While this proves the economic viability of high-volume, low-cost clinics, Dr. Mackie cautions that for a clinic to be self-sustaining, it must meet a relatively high volume of surgeries on an

ongoing basis. He estimates the need for 25-30 surgeries per shift to cover all overhead costs.

Dr. Mackie also recommends that nonprofit clinics, which inherently wish to help the less fortunate, establish a fund to provide financial assistance for those who cannot afford the regular fees.

### **Veterinary Opposition**

Although Dr. Mackie was fortunate not to experience opposition from the veterinary community when opening his clinics, he acknowledges that this is a problem which others are likely to encounter. Veterinarians, who often ignore the issue until it becomes a NIMBY syndrome (meaning "not in my backyard"), frequently resist low-cost spay/neuter clinics based on the belief that they will be detrimental to their own businesses. When faced with veterinary opposition, Dr. Mackie advises clinics to continue with their plans, as he feels that at this point in time, the veterinary community knows that they're not going to win the battle against these clinics.

### **High-Volume Spay/Neuter Clinics Impact Pet Overpopulation**

High-volume spay/neuter clinics play an important role in reducing pet overpopulation in the communities they serve. Although it's difficult to quantify the exact impact Dr. Mackie's clinics have made on dog and cat overpopulation, the sheer volume of animals these clinics have prevented from reproducing has undoubtedly had a tremendous effect on the pet overpopulation crisis. After 23 years of service, Dr. Mackie estimates his clinics have altered approximately 300,000 animals, thereby preventing countless puppies and kittens from contributing to pet overpopulation.

Dr. Mackie also cites anecdotal indications of the effectiveness of the programs, such as a heightened awareness of pet overpopulation, evidenced by increased community response to this tragic problem. In the region Dr. Mackie serves, this has been particularly evident in the field of early age spay/neuter, a practice which he has performed for the last 11 years and which he strongly advocates. Dr. Mackie works with the veterinarians who serve the city of Los Angeles' six shelters, where early age spay/neuter is essential to their NBA (Neuter Before Adoption) policy. These shelters adopt out more than 20,000 animals a year, with each of the animals being spayed or neutered prior to placement.

### **Special Veterinary Training**

Faced with an initial groundswell of activity upon first opening, high-volume spay/neuter clinic veterinarians often have difficulty meeting the demand and can soon find themselves overwhelmed by the monumental task they've undertaken. In efforts to facilitate the success of high-volume spay/neuter clinics, Dr. Mackie offers special training which he feels may be helpful for veterinarians practicing in a high-volume setting.

Dr. Mackie's special training for veterinarians teaches a spay/neuter procedure he devised which eliminates and refines many of the steps traditionally taught in veterinary school-steps which he considers to be totally superfluous, adding nothing to the surgery except

time. The special training sessions typically last two or three days and may be tailored to meet the needs of the attendee.

Referring to his training session, Dr. Mackie states, "I know that this is what I need to do in my waning years of productive practice-to leverage what I know and pass it on to others. That's the greatest gift I can give, really." Please contact Dr. Mackie for information on his special training for veterinarians.

### **Suggestions For Those Interested In Starting A High-Volume Spay/Neuter Clinic**

Based on the incredible amount of knowledge he's gained in his 23 years of operating successful spay/neuter clinics, Dr. Mackie gives presentations and offers literature for those who are interested in starting their own high-volume spay/neuter clinic. His 16-page booklet entitled "Establishing and Maintaining A Low Cost Community Spay and Neuter Clinic" was originally prepared for a presentation he made at the 1998 No Kill Conference.

The report provides general guidelines and reveals potential pitfalls for those who wish to start and operate a low-cost, high-volume spay/neuter clinic. It covers such concerns as the need for spay/neuter clinics; various types of clinic ownership; facility requirements; staff considerations, including information on how and where to find a veterinarian; and much more. The report also details more specific matters such as the necessary equipment and supplies, which are listed with their approximate prices. The booklet is available from Dr. Mackie for \$50. (Please see address below.)

### **Early Age Neutering**

In addition to providing information on spay/neuter clinics, Dr. Mackie also offers a brief videotape on early age neutering. The video is produced from a practical standpoint and is made for viewing by veterinarians and veterinary technicians who have doubts about altering the very young. The video may be ordered from Dr. Mackie for \$14.

### **Conclusion**

High-volume spay/neuter clinics play an important role in reducing pet overpopulation. Unfortunately, there aren't enough of these clinics to meet the need for the low-cost spay/neuter services they offer. Although Dr. Mackie isn't aware of the exact number of high-volume clinics currently operating in the United States, he acknowledges that there aren't many.

We hope the information Dr. Mackie offers will aid others in establishing their own successful clinics. In addition to the print and video resources and his special veterinary training sessions, Dr. Mackie is also available for consultant work for individuals or groups. To order Dr. Mackie's materials, or to discuss veterinary training or consultation services, please contact Dr. Mackie at: W. Marvin Mackie, DVM; 450 Arcadia Drive; San Pedro, CA 90731; Phone: (310) 547-4750; Fax: (310) 547-5989; email: [spaydvm@aol.com](mailto:spaydvm@aol.com)