



## PET IDENTIFICATION AND OVERPOPULATION

### *Introduction*

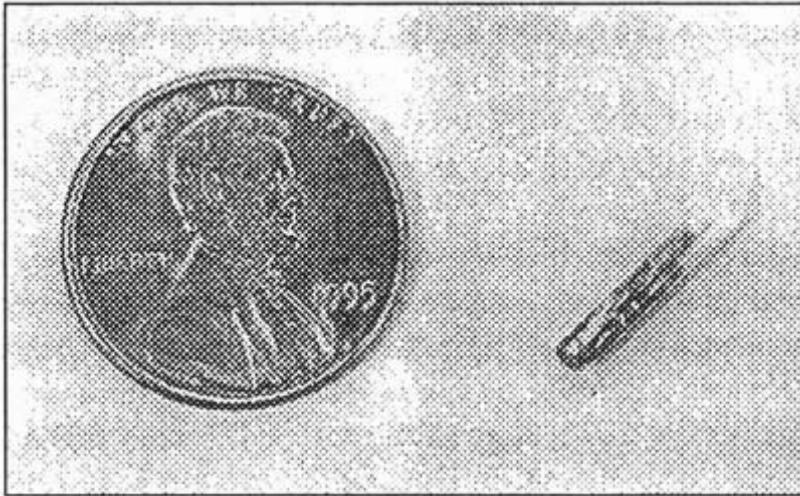
As our supporters know, ISAR devotes a significant amount of our resources to ameliorating pet overpopulation. We believe that the current lack of identification for the majority of companion animals contributes to the ongoing tragedy of dog and cat overpopulation and also causes unnecessary anguish for pets and their guardians, as evidenced by the following:

- It's estimated that one-third of all dogs will become lost at some time during their lives. Shelters report that the vast majority of strays lack identification, undoubtedly contributing to the somber estimates that only 16% of dogs and only 2% of cats entering shelters are reunited with their guardians. These strays add to the tragic surplus of cats and dogs and as a result, countless pets die needless deaths because their guardians cannot be located.
- Without proper identification, lost animals are likely to stray for extended periods of time. Unless spayed or neutered, the longer an animal is without the supervision of its guardian, the greater chance it has of reproducing and adding to the overpopulation problem.
- Caretakers who manage feral cat colonies have found that identifying the animals for the purpose of maintaining sterilization and vaccination information is essential, but troublesome. The difficulty, and in some cases inability, to access this information costs caretakers valuable time and resources that could more effectively be used to manage the colony and curtail its population growth.
- Millions of animals are abandoned to fend for themselves when their irresponsible guardians no longer wish to care for them. Without any definite means of identifying the animal (and its caretaker), there is little chance of identifying and punishing the thoughtless perpetrator.
- In her book Stolen for Profit, author Judith Reitman estimates that as many as 2 million dogs are stolen every year, with many destined for research facilities. While some institutions attempt to return identified pets to their rightful guardians, dealers thwart these efforts by removing collars and identification tags, thereby condemning cherished family pets to doom in scientists' laboratories.

These conditions clearly demonstrate the need for a safe, quick, and cost-effective way to permanently identify cats and dogs. ISAR proposes and supports a simple solution to this problem: the microchip.

### *Microchips*

A microchip is a tiny transponder that can be safely implanted into animals to provide permanent and unequivocal identification. The chip is encased in a tiny glass tube which is formulated to be compatible with living tissue.



*The microchip, shown here next to a penny, is only as large as a grain of uncooked rice, but it can provide a wealth of information about the animal in which it's implanted.*

Each chip is assigned a unique identification number that can be read by special scanners using low-

frequency radio waves. This number corresponds to a database record in a national registry which provides the information necessary to contact the animal's caretaker. The record can also include alternate contact persons; a medical history of the pet, including whether it's spayed or neutered; health conditions; necessary medications; and even favorite foods. A toll-free number is provided to retrieve the information and phone lines are staffed 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. The database record can be updated when the guardian moves, if the animal should change homes, to update medical information, etc. Microchips take only a fraction of a second to read with the proper equipment and are correctly deciphered approximately 99% of the time. With an average life of 25 years, the chips offer virtually permanent identification.

The simple process of implanting a microchip is similar to a vaccination. A syringe is used to inject the microchip in a designated spot, which for dogs and cats, is under the skin between the shoulder blades. This allows vets, shelters, and animal control officers to know exactly where to scan when a stray animal is found. It's not necessary for a veterinarian to implant the chip; increasingly, shelters are microchipping all adopted animals and many offer the service to the public as well. The cost to implant a microchip varies, but is usually between \$10 and \$40, with national database registration costing an additional \$15 to \$35.

Four companies manufacture microchips distributed in the United States: American Veterinary Identification Devices (AVID), Digital Angel Corporation (marketed under

the name Home Again), Trovan, and Crystal Tag. Universal scanners are available which are capable of reading the different types of chips.

Each manufacturer has its own database, but information may be cross-registered in multiple databases, including those maintained by local shelters and veterinarians. The chip's ID number indicates which database to call for the information.

Universal scanners are provided free of charge to animal shelters that agree to scan incoming animals. To obtain a free scanner, shelter directors can contact AVID by calling 1-800-336-AVID and selecting the option for sales. For sales information on purchasing a scanner from the Digital Angel Corporation, call 1-800-2FINDPET.

#### *Microchips gain in popularity in the United States and beyond*

Due to their effectiveness, accuracy, and ease of use, microchips are receiving rave reviews from veterinarians, animal control officers, shelter personnel, pet guardians, and others concerned for the well-being of animals. An increasing number of shelters now require all adopted animals to be microchipped prior to leaving the facility, an admirable example of insightful shelter policy. Many shelters also scan every incoming animal for a chip, allowing microchipped strays to be immediately returned to their guardians.

The many benefits of microchipping are also being recognized by legislators both nationally and internationally, as evidenced by the emergence of laws and ordinances stipulating microchipping of companion animals. For example:

- The state of Hawaii has mandated microchipping for all cats and dogs entering the state since May of 1997.
- For years, all cats and dogs adopted from San Diego shelters have been microchipped prior to leaving the facilities. City Animal Control officials proclaim the success of the program, citing increased reunions between strays and their guardians.
- The Los Angeles City Council recently voted to follow San Diego's example by requiring that every cat or dog adopted from a LA animal shelter be microchipped prior to leaving the facility. Other cities are enacting similar regulations.
- Internationally, there are various microchipping laws in effect in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Australia, and the city of Moscow.

Microchips are preferred to more traditional forms of identification because unlike tattoos, a microchip is easy to apply, easy to read, it won't fade, and it cannot be altered. In contrast to collars, the chip can't become lost, pets can't slip out of the house without them, and they cannot be removed.

#### *Success*

Although microchipping is a relatively new procedure, having emerged only over the past decade, the number of microchipped animals already totals in the millions, a clear

indication that guardians are eager to gain the protection for their pets which is afforded by this technology. Microchipping companies have distributed thousands of scanners to veterinarians, animal shelters, and animal control agencies. According to the national database registries, microchips have been responsible for reuniting tens of thousands of lost pets with their guardians. The number of successful reunions between pets and their guardians continues to grow at an increasing rate as use of the chips becomes more widespread.

The chips, which provide unequivocal identification ensure lost pets are reunited with their rightful guardians-and not imposters-which is critical when multiple "guardians" try to claim a particular stray. Without the positive identification of the chip, it may be difficult to ascertain to whom the animal should be released.

Take the case of the missing Pomeranian, for example. When a distraught guardian received word that his lost Pomeranian had been taken to the local shelter, he anxiously rushed to the facility to claim his pet. However, several other individuals had already tried to claim the dog as their own. Only a microchip could prove who was the rightful guardian. Thankfully, the man had exercised the insight to have his pet microchipped; the chip provided indisputable proof that the pet was his and ensured it was returned to him.

Microchipping as a means of permanent identification offers a multitude of benefits to animals, caretakers, and the general public.

- Microchips are invaluable for reuniting lost pets with their caretakers, sparing both pets and guardians considerable anguish and affording unaltered strays less opportunity to reproduce.
- Microchipping feral cats provides a definite means of maintaining information on each cat and can greatly assist those caring for the colonies.
- Since the chips can't be altered or removed, microchipping can aid in returning stolen pets to their guardians.
- Because a microchipped animal can be traced to the person responsible for its care, microchipping can serve to deter people from abandoning their pets, particularly when incorporated with a mandatory identification program.
- Faster and more frequent reunions between strays and their caretakers will result in less noise and mess caused by strays; fewer cats turning feral or dogs forming packs; a reduction in confrontations between strays and other animals or humans; fewer strays as hazards to vehicle traffic; and decreased financial and staffing burden on shelters, many of which are funded by taxpayers.

ISAR advocates the use of this technology due to its many benefits, but particularly for its potential to reduce pet overpopulation.

*Caveat*

While ISAR is not in the habit of criticizing products from particular manufacturers, we feel it's significant to note that in the past the Destron/Home Again system has been closely affiliated with the American Kennel Club, an entity which ISAR has historically and consistently opposed due to their contribution to pet overpopulation (please see our AKC Special Report). Although the Home Again system does appear to offer the many benefits of microchipping, including the potential to reduce pet overpopulation, ISAR cannot ignore the profound irony that Home Again is backed by an organization which actively promotes the breeding of purebred dogs while displaying a blatant indifference toward the lives of homeless animals.