

LIFE IN THE LAB:

What could happen to your lost dog or cat
in an Ontario Research Facility?

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Animal Alliance of Canada's
No Pets in Research
Campaign

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Introduction

As an animal lover in Ontario, you may never have asked yourself what life would be like for your dog or cat, if he or she somehow went missing and wound up being sold or surrendered to a lab.

You may not want to ask. The question itself is disturbing to most of us. However, if you ever got access to any inspection reports of Ontario research facilities and institutions that use stray dogs and cats for teaching or experiments, you would be even more disturbed by the answers.

Through FOI (Freedom of Information) requests, the Animal Alliance recently received a number of reports of inspections conducted by OMAFRA (Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs) in some of these facilities, covering the years 2013 to 2017. The names of the institutions are blacked out, along with the species of animals involved and specific descriptions of the types of experiments or procedures or studies for which these animals were used.

However, by literally reading between the lines of these reports, it's possible to piece together some of what underlies the blacked-out statistics and redacted information. For instance, in the case of approximately 20 of the reports received through FOI requests, there are enough unredacted references to kennels, pet food—and occasionally, even the words “dogs” and “cats” -- to make clear that these inspections were of facilities where dogs and/or cats were among animals used for various kinds of research.

Even heavily redacted as they are, these inspectors' reports offer sharp criticism of how these animals are housed and handled, and they cite numerous violations of standard operating procedures. Almost all of the facilities reported on are taken to task for deficiencies in sanitation, inadequacy in design of housing, low standard of living conditions and lack of safety. And those are only the housekeeping issues.

Even more alarmingly, the inspectors make reference in their reports to the use of expired drugs—including anesthetics and pain-relievers—as well as injury to animals through faulty equipment and rundown facilities. There are also numerous instances of humans' failure to protect dogs and cats in their care from other animals, who may be vicious or dangerously ill, as well as failure to provide adequate veterinary care or proper oversight.

In fact, the more closely you look at these reports, the worse it gets. Below are specifics of a few of the numerous examples of neglect, incompetence and outright abuse of dogs and cats cited by inspectors, over a four-year period in a number of Ontario research facilities.

Disturbing Details

If you've ever been unlucky enough to lose a pet, or have surrendered a dog or cat who wound up in research in Ontario, you might console yourself that your pet has gone to a good place. Or, you may believe that any animal sold or given to research is at least making his or her contribution to the advancement of human knowledge, under humane conditions and in comfortable surroundings. Sadly, if that's what you think, you ought to think again.

Specifically, here's what a dog's life can be in an Ontario research facility:

- It can mean being medicated, or even anesthetized for a surgery, using an expired drug, as in [Inspection Report #249](#), which cites Naloxone, Pentobarbital and other controlled drugs found out in the open or in storage with best-before dates already exceeded.
- As well, being a dog in research in Ontario could mean that you are subjected to painful procedures, with nobody managing your pain or even making notes about medication. A specific instance of this negligence turns up in [Inspection Report #146](#), where the inspector writes that “intervention action to be taken for dogs that were experiencing severe pain was not included—e.g., types and dosages of analgesics to be given.”
- Being a dog in research also means you could be missing a 4x2 inch patch of fur from your chest, but no one seems to have noticed, much less wondered whether anxiety or loneliness or illness was the case of this hair loss. (Nobody, that is, besides the inspector who wrote a critical comment about it in [Inspection Report #187](#).) A dog's life in a research lab means you could be housed in a small, rusty cage where the lights are never turned off, but you can't see the other dogs you hear barking nearby, and the humans don't show up on weekends to feed you or clean your cage. (as cited in various reports.)
- Living in a research lab could also mean, according to [Inspection Report #106](#), being a dog who “was having difficulties getting up in her run, possibly due to the slippery surface of the pen.” Subsequently, the inspector learned that dog “had been jumped on by one of the dogs out in the run,” and suggested a mat on the floor to provide traction for this injured and put-upon dog. In the same report, the inspector notes that “several of the metal gate fronts of the dog pens were rusting,” and hence unsanitary.

Meanwhile, a stray cat in Ontario who winds up in one of these research facilities might have a life no better than a dog's:

- Being a cat in a lab can mean there are no Standard Operating Procedures to ensure “consistent, regular involvement of and communication with the veterinary staff,” as noted by an inspector in [Inspection Report #198](#). As well, there could be a lack of “requirements for regular clinical veterinary rounds and veterinary involvement for the cats in the facilities,” despite “invasiveness of the procedures performed.”
- In addition, sloppy practices and lack of oversight may mean that your lost cat who ended up in research is being fed from “an open bag of feed stored on the floor,” in violation of rules that exist to “prevent the feed from being contaminated.” ([Inspection Report #294](#)) Or else, according to another report, your cat might be eating food from a bag stored right next to dangerous chemicals.
- Also, as various OMAFRA inspection reports reveal, cats can end up living in a room that is too cold, or a room that makes them sneeze because the humidity is too high, or are confined in a dirty cage with the ceaseless din of dogs barking, which keeps them in a state of waking terror. And as for physical suffering along the way...An ominous note is struck in one inspector's recommendation that “serious consideration should be given to providing experience in current anesthetic strategies for students, despite this being a terminal procedure.” ([Inspection Report #138](#))
- Perhaps worst of all, the absence or ignorance of procedures and protocols means that cats can be housed with other felines who are sick--sometimes with fatal consequences for all. The inspector who wrote up [Inspection Report #107](#) noted: “I was informed that there was an outbreak of feline panleukopenia in the cat room. There was no opportunity to isolate the infected cats, as there wasn't a quarantine room in the facility and some animals had to be euthanized.”

In other words, cats—like dogs, and no doubt other species of animals at any number of facilities at any time—frequently die, and not only “in the name of research” or “for the benefit of human knowledge,” which researchers repeatedly cite as rationales for animal experimentation. Often, lost dogs and cats in Ontario who wind up in research die needlessly and carelessly and pointlessly and all alone, long before they get to the experimental chamber or the autopsy room—or even out of their holding cages.

How do lost pets wind up in research in Ontario?

Ontario is not unique in Canada in using lost or surrendered pets—known as “randomly sourced animals” -- as subjects of research in accredited laboratories, teaching hospitals and educational institutions. But what makes this topic of particular importance here in Canada’s most populous province is the fact that the practice is mandated by law. Under the Ontario Animals for Research Act, animal shelters and other municipal facilities that collect and keep lost or surrendered pets are required to turn over to research, if requested, animals that are unclaimed by owners after 72 hours.

Thanks to efforts by the Animal Alliance and other advocacy organizations over the past several decades, a large number of municipalities in Ontario—including Toronto, Oshawa, Clarington and some other urban centres—have opted not to abide by this mandate, choosing to keep unclaimed pets beyond the 72-hour deadline and for as long as necessary to either return them to owners or adopt them out. However, in the case of municipalities—frequently rural—which lack internal funds or public support or paid personnel to provide shelter and care for stray dogs and cats, as well as the clout to stand up to provincial law, the contracts for animal collection are often awarded to private operators.

These operators may offset the economic strain of providing ongoing shelter and care to stray or abandoned pets. However, sometimes these operators are in the business of pickup and shelter of these animals solely for their own financial gain. Therefore, they are glad to cut down their own overhead by quickly selling unclaimed pets to research facilities.

In some cases, where there are no municipal bylaws in place at all (especially in the case of cats, who roam at large or live in feral colonies far more so than canines) it may be that no operator has the contract for collection of stray pets. That means that freelance individuals—sometimes posing as humane society officials—drive around picking up strays, or even stealing pets from doorsteps and backyards, in order to collect the fee for turning them over to research. Which is why the Ontario Animals for Research Act needs to be amended, in order to eliminate the mandate to turn over defenseless pet animals, to a fate that is frequently unkind, sometimes cruel and usually never even known by the individual or family who lost or surrendered their pet in the first place.

The most disturbing details of all

Perhaps, looking over the disturbing details from inspectors' reports cited above, you might be inclined to think: Well, at least OMAFRA does send out these inspectors who make reports. And the violations cited in those reports, you assume, get rectified for the benefit of animals in these and other research facilities.

Certainly, it's better to have inspectors visiting these facilities than not to have inspections at all. However ... because of funding constraints (only becoming more acute under the policies of the new provincial government) the frequency of inspections and availability of inspection personnel are both extremely low.

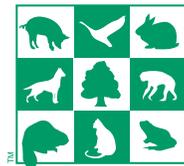
As well, because of the inherently secretive nature of research, both in the public and private sectors, it's extremely difficult to obtain any information at all about what goes on in laboratories and other facilities where research is done on animals, including lost pets. Even the material gleaned by Animal Alliance from the reports cited above, along with numerous others, has been severely redacted. As stated at the outset, much reading between blacked-out lines is required, and in many cases, Freedom of Information requests have either been stalled or outright denied.

Which raises the most disturbing question of all: If what has been left unredacted in these reports reveals such depressing truths about the fate of dogs, cats and other animals in research in Ontario, how bad is the material that's been redacted? In other words: if this is what OMAFRA is willing—under duress, mind you—to release via Freedom of Information, what is still remaining hidden from the reports of these inspectors who go into labs, universities, colleges and other facilities in Ontario where lost, strayed, surrendered or even stolen pets are used for research, experimentation and as teaching tools?



NoPetsinResearch.ca

*No Pets in Research is our campaign
to end the taking of pet cats and dogs
for experimentation.*



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