

Impact of Cat Friendly and Fear Free Handling Training on Veterinary Students and Professionals in Uruguay

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Abstract

The present study evaluated the long-term impact of a two-course training cycle on feline behavior and handling, offered in 2023 at the Facultad de Veterinaria, Universidad de la República (Uruguay). The program included a basic course (Feline Ethology) and an intermediate course (Clinical Ethology and Cat Friendly and Fear Free Handling), neither of which were previously incorporated into the undergraduate veterinary curriculum. Out of 201 enrollees, 196 were successfully contacted, and 150 of them completed a one-year follow-up survey (response rate 76.5%). Respondents included 96 veterinary students (64%), 52 veterinarians (34.7%), and 2 classified as “other” (1.3%). Kruskal–Wallis tests showed significant differences across training level groups in self-reported handling ability ($H = 11.37$, $p = 0.003$), confidence in clinical practice ($H = 6.83$, $p = 0.033$), reduction in veterinary practitioner stress ($H = 6.15$, $p = 0.046$), and enjoyment of working with felines ($H = 8.52$, $p = 0.014$). Post-hoc analyses showed that participants who completed both courses reported significantly higher scores in handling ability, confidence, stress reduction, and enjoyment compared with those who completed only one course. These findings show that structured Cat Friendly and Fear Free handling training was associated with long-lasting educational and professional benefits, particularly for those participants who completed the full two-course cycle. Even one course increased awareness of feline stress and welfare. These results highlight the importance of integrating feline-focused welfare and low-stress handling education into veterinary curricula to improve both animal welfare and practitioner wellbeing.