

Dear Animal Lovers and Benefactors of our Work in Southern Italy,

I am sure you have asked yourselves why I have not sent out any mail recently! Since mid-July I have been engaged literally full time fighting the change in the Animal Welfare Act of the Region Campania. I started writing letters of protest, and contacting journalists, welfare groups and veterinary colleagues to urge them to join the action - clearly without any success.

Maybe it is necessary to explain a little bit about the Italian system of handling the problem of strays, which is really very different to that of most other European countries:

Since 1991 Italy became a "No-Kill" Country. Stray dogs and cats are not allowed to be destroyed, unless they are very sick and do not respond anymore to treatments or if they are so aggressive that they will be a threat to the human population. They have to be caught by the public health services and kept in kennels for life at the expense of the communities where there were caught. In these kennels the public veterinary services have to take care of any health problem of these animals, they have to identify them with a microchip and register them in the regional data base (identification and registration has been an input by myself to draft the national law in 1991 and has been compulsory for dogs since then!) and they have to be spayed/neutered, especially before re-homing.

It sounds fantastic, doesn't it?

Unfortunately, we are in Southern Italy and many of the public services do not function very well - and this includes some if not most of the public veterinary services. Injured dogs hit by a car were left for many hours or days until the public services picked them up. Even if the mayors could decide on spay/neuter/return programs for stray dogs on their communal territory, it frequently takes a long time before dogs are caught to be fixed by the public health animal clinics. Since the enforcement of this law did not function very well, animal welfare groups continued their job like they did before the law of 1991 was passed. They rescued stray dogs (and cats), took them, at their own expense, to private vets for treatment and spaying/neutering. They re-homed them or kept them in their own shelters.

On 29th (!!) of December 2022, the regional Government of Campania, without any preannouncement and "hidden" in the budget plan for the Region of the years 2024, 2025 and 2026 (Law number 18, article 63), passed a change of the regional animal protection law Nr. 3 of 2019 causing severe consequences. A couple of weeks before I had a long talk on the phone with a vet colleague from the regional public health veterinary service: suddenly, after 32 years, they decided to enforce the law from 1991, because they had been reprimanded by the Ministry of Health: the index of dogs caught with identification/registration and taken back to their owners compared with dogs caught without it was completely unacceptable, because a very high percentage of dogs caught were NOT identified and registered!

They are convinced to change this index through the following measurements:

- Private veterinarians, in future, can only register dogs in the regional data base if the microchip number of the mother of the dog is known
- If the dog to be identified and registered is older than 2 months, even if the microchip of the mother is known, the owner has to go to the public health animal clinic for identification and registration and has to pay a fine of Euro 300,00 because the law prescribes that dogs need to be registered under the age of 2 months.

MY PERSONAL AND SPONTANEOUS THOUGHTS:

The word will spread and here are the options for the owner of a dog not yet identified and registered:

- They go to the public health veterinary clinic to pay the fine to straighten out any problems with the law
- They continue to keep the dog without identification/registration, as they had done up til now, because no sanctions were ever enforced
- They abandon the dog straight away to avoid any problems with the authorities and especially because they cannot afford to pay a fine amounting to a third of their monthly salary
-

I produced a mini video in English language and published it on YouTube where in 3 minutes I explain the problem:

<https://youtu.be/FXO-jxPgm-s>

Animal welfare groups or even normal citizens who love animals cannot adopt a stray directly from the streets anymore. Now it needs to be picked up by the public dog catcher, transferred into the public shelter where it needs to stay for 30 days to give its eventual owner (who obviously "forgot" to identify and register the dog and since nobody checked on private dogs) the chance to get it back. During this time the dog needs to be spayed/neutered and treated for all diseases and vaccinated. Puppies were allowed to be pre-adopted by animal groups and after 30 days the adoption contract became legally valid so they could be re-homed. These puppies have, by contract, to be brought back after(!) sexual maturity for free spaying/neutering or present a vet's certificate stating that the dog is fixed

MY PERSONAL AND SPONTANEOUS THOUGHTS:

Dogs staying in public shelters or shelters under contract with municipalities:

I have visited an infinite number of different animal shelters over the last 40+ years, including those run by animal welfare organisations and not just in the Campania region. The psychological and physical welfare in most of these structures does NOT comply with Italian regional and national laws and, above all, does not meet any international standards. Not to mention the hygienic conditions in most (public) veterinary clinics. Healthy animals are very likely to come out of these structures with infectious diseases.

Birth control:

If you compare the data from different countries, especially from the United States of America, which also placed puppies with a contract that the adopted animals would be returned after sexual maturity for free neutering, you find that about 30 per cent of the new owners changed their minds and did not even have the adopted animal neutered by a private vet. I started spaying and neutering ALL dogs and cats BEFORE adoption at the beginning of the 1990s, even puppies at 6 weeks of age, and I taught this technique to my Italian colleagues, including my colleagues at the public veterinary offices.

Socialisation of puppies:

We now know that puppies need to be socialised in the first few weeks of their lives. If they do not learn to cope with all kinds of encounters (contact with people, with traffic, with other dogs, walking on the lead, etc.) by the age of 3 months, it will be very difficult to eliminate these behavioural problems. It is therefore very important to avoid keeping puppies under 3 months of age in shelters where nobody works with them and confronts them with "real life" scenarios. We still have such an animal in our centre: Baricchiello still won't let us touch him even after 15 years!

The colleague from the local government spoke about the lack of cooperation from freelance vets. I absolutely agree with her. How often have other private vets contacted me to complain that I neutered "THEIR" client's dog free of charge during our "Adozione Strada" project (= free neutering and free identification with registration in the regional database for animals found in the street). The people who brought their animals to this project signed the declaration without batting an eyelid that they had found the animal on the street, even if they had owned the animal for a long time. The other vet simply "forgot" to talk to his client about the compulsory identification/registration requirements for their dog!

During our "Adozione Strada" project, we microchipped and registered around 500 dogs (and many cats) a year free of charge (so the animals could no longer be abandoned without consequences) and neutered them free of charge (no more offspring).

But there were also a large number of colleagues who practised their profession responsibly, gave correct advice to pet owners and also convinced them of birth control and identification/registration. Many have also taken on the tasks of the veterinary office and neutered and identified found animals - for reduced prices!.

There are also official vets and public veterinary clinics that cannot (or do not want to) keep up with the high demand for neutering street animals. Thanks to the help of freelance vets and committed animal welfare activists who have re-homed animals directly from the street into families, the public health service and also the municipalities, which are required by law to pay for the lifelong rehoming of found dogs, huge sums of money have been saved and many animals have been spared a stay in a public centre.

These valuable resources are now simply being eliminated by the amendment to the Animal Welfare Act and the consequences can already be seen from the data, the rumour about the new law is already circulating:

- The ratio of the number of microchips registered in the database of the Campania Region in the period from 1 January 2022 to 30 June 2022:
Public animal health service: 5,775
Freelance veterinarians: 9,953
- In 2023 in the same period:
Public animal health service: 4,132
Freelance veterinarians: 8,039

Further data shows that the synergy between the public health service, animal welfare organisations and independent veterinarians has been successful:

- Number of dogs housed in animal shelters in the Campania region at taxpayers' expense:

In 2014, there were almost 60,000
In 2023 there are around 16,000

I have the impression that data and, above all, public spending play no role in this story.

If you would like to send a message to those responsible in the Campania region, here are the e-mail addresses:

Dott. Paolo Sarnelli, Director of the Public Health Animal Services of Campania Region p.sarnelli@regione.campania.it

Dott. Vincenzo De Luca, President Campania Region
capogabinetto@regione.campania.it

Public Prosecutor's Office - Court of Auditors Campania Region,
President: Antonio Giuseppone:
procura.regionale.campania@corteconti.it

That's more or less what is covered by the text in my film. A small extract was also broadcast on the news on one of the Mediaset channels. However, the response was minimal.

Perhaps you have another idea of what could be done?

Thank you so much for your help and support and very best wishes from Southern Italy
Dorothea Friz, DVM