

House Bill 445 – Animal Welfare – Declawing Cats – Prohibited Acts
Renee Rucinsky, DVM, Diplomate, American Board Of Veterinary Practitioners (Feline specialty)
Mid Atlantic Cat Hospital, Queenstown MD

HB 445 - Support Testimony

Dear Chair Barve, Vice Chair Stein, and members of the Environment and Transportation Committee:

I am writing in support of HB 445 to make the act of onychectomy (declaw) of cats illegal in the state of Maryland.

With over 25 years of experience being a small animal veterinarian, and 20 of those years in feline specialty practice, I can confess that my feelings on the procedure have changed over my career. I have been on the side of declawing cats, thinking that at least if I did the procedure, I would do it correctly, and I would prevent cats from losing their homes. It is with great sadness that I admit that I was incredibly misguided.

The act of declawing a cat entails ten separate amputations. As veterinarians, we have access to stellar pain medications. We are educated in multimodal pain control, including nerve blocks. We can dispense long acting opioids to owners and get the cat through the procedure. The amount of drugs needed to keep a cat comfortable is extreme. This pain control happens only if the veterinarian is skilled in recognizing pain. The American Animal Hospital Association, the American Association of Feline Practitioners, and the American College of Veterinary Anesthesia all have extensive protocols for recognizing and treating pain in cats. Identifying pain in cats is tremendously complicated, and frankly, despite extensive resources, it is either unrecognized or blatantly ignored by a significant number of practicing veterinarians.

Assume that a veterinarian recognizes that appropriate pain control is needed. Removing the entire last bone of the digits (as declaw is not just the nail) permanently alters the mobility of the cat. Many cats seem to do 'fine' after the procedure. Our patients really don't have any direct way to communicate their comfort level to us. Cats are both predators and prey animals, and as such, they are evolutionarily wired to hide weakness. Pain is weakness. A cat will go to great lengths to hide pain so as not to appear weak or vulnerable. Because of this, frequently the amount of pain control is severely underdosed. Inadequate pain control for any procedure set the cat up for problems for life. 'Wind up' is a documented complication of incomplete pain control, and can alter the cat's personality, increase overall lifetime anxiety, and contribute to long term behavior problems.

Our culture is a culture of convenience. What people don't realize is that by protecting their belongings with a quick fix of a declaw, they are much more likely to have a cat who has inappropriate urination and defecation issues. They are much more likely to have a reactive cat, who will be labeled as aggressive. The most common reason for cats to be relinquished to

shelters is behavior problems. One recent study showed that cats who were declawed with more than three times as likely to have house soiling issues. This is completely avoidable.

With appropriate education of cat owners and veterinarians, we can in theory eliminate feline declaws. People don't usually adopt animals to mutilate them and cause pain. However, the average veterinary appointment is 10 minutes long. There is no time for many veterinarians to educate clients on options. It is human nature to take the easy route – it is much easier to just do the procedure and move on with the day then have the same conversation over and over with people who really don't want to listen.

Since my practice stopped performing onychectomy 10 years ago, our clients have not sought to have the procedure done at other hospitals. We educate people on proper training and nail care. We have had cats and kittens live in harmony with other pets, babies, and immunocompromised people. The products available to help train cats to scratch appropriately are extensive, affordable, and effective. There is no medical, social, or behavioral reason to inflict such pain and mutilation of an animal.

Declawing cats increases the risk of unwanted behaviors and may increase risk for developing back pain. Evidence of inadequate surgical technique is common. Among declawed cats, retained bone pieces secondary to poor surgical technique further increases risk of adverse behaviors and chronic pain. The use of optimal surgical technique does not eliminate the risk of adverse behavior subsequent to onychectomy.¹

I strongly urge you to move forward with HB445. It is the right thing to do for the cats of Maryland. I am happy to speak to any or all of you with further documentation of the need to stop this abuse of pets.

Sincerely,

Renee Rucinsky, DVM, DABVP (Feline Practice)
Mid Atlantic Cat Hospital
Queenstown, MD
Rucinsky.mach@gmail.com

¹Martell-Moran NK, Solano H, et al. Pain and Adverse Behavior in Declawed Cats. Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery. 2017.

²Gerard AF, Larson M, et al. Telephone Survey to Investigate Relationships Between Onychectomy or Onychectomy Technique and House Soiling in Cats. JAVMA 2016; 249: 638-643.

