Contrasting practices and opinions of UK-based veterinary surgeons around neutering cats at four months old

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Introduction
Although feline neutering rates in the UK are high, to be most effective, neutering has to be carried out early enough to prevent accidental litters. The majority of unplanned pregnancies occur between four and nine months of age, and, although unusual, female kittens can become pregnant at four months old. As such, the BVA, the British Small Animal Veterinary Association and many cat welfare organisations support neutering of pet cats from 16 weeks of age.

Despite these recommendations, prepubertal neutering is not practised consistently in the UK. To understand the reasons for this, this study aimed to evaluate the behaviours and perceptions of UK vets around neutering cats at four months of age.

Approach
Between January and March 2019, a cross-sectional online questionnaire was distributed to practising vets in the UK that routinely treat cats.

The information collected included details of the vet and the practice that they work in, the vet’s current practices around neutering cats at four months old, their personal views on neutering at four months old and their perceptions of the prevalence of the practice across the wider veterinary community. Participants were also asked to describe any barriers they perceived to neutering cats at four months old, specifically focusing on any training and information needs.

Generalised linear models were used to identify explanatory variables associated with vets that would recommend neutering client-owned cats at four months of age (practice policy permitting) versus those that would not.

Chi-squared tests were used to identify associations between vets’ beliefs, their wider perceptions of neutering and their current practices. To identify underlying themes in the free-text responses, thematic analysis was also performed.

Results
Of the 483 vets that completed the questionnaire, 329 (68 per cent) reported that they either currently neutered cats at four months of age or would if it was practice policy. However, a significantly lower proportion of vets neuter at four months in practices that infrequently neuter unowned cats (P=0.005).

Overall, 52 per cent of respondents would recommend neutering client-owned cats at four months of age if practice policy permitted. This proportion was significantly higher for female vets (P=0.03) and those that worked in a practice that allowed for neutering owned cats at four months (P<0.001).

Vets that carry out and recommend neutering at four months old were more likely to agree that neutering at this age is beneficial for cat welfare and population control. They were also more likely to agree that neutering at four months is widely practised. Thematic analysis found contrasting views on neutering at four months old, with these views being largely dependent upon the participants’ current neutering practises.

Vets that do not carry out or recommend neutering of cats at four months of age indicated they felt significantly less able to make the case to peers and owners regarding the benefits of neutering at four months. Key barriers cited included a lack of access to evidence as well as a need for more training.

Interpretation
This study found that not all vets based in the UK consistently neuter cats at four months old. This is largely consistent with earlier studies and highlights that, although prevalence may be increasing, the rate of adherence to current recommendations on neutering age is slow, perhaps, in part, due to a lack of awareness.

Vets that work in practices that do not routinely see unowned cats are less likely to neuter at four months. Thematic analysis revealed this might be due to a perceived lack of need, with the rationale being that if strays are not present then prepubertal neutering is not necessary.

The findings of this study also reveal that vets have significantly different beliefs around neutering at four months, with many assuming their own practices are the norm. This highlights the importance of within-practice experience in forming vets’ perceptions of neutering at four months old.

Although the findings of this study are comparable with those of other studies, they are based on a convenience sample and so may not be generalisable to the wider profession in the UK. As such, they should be interpreted cautiously.

Significance of findings
The findings of this study indicate that familiarity and experience with the procedure, alongside perceived norms, are central to vets’ beliefs around neutering cats at four months old. As such, improving vets’ access to appropriate training and resources will be necessary to increase the prevalence of cats being neutered at four months old.