



Using Science to Halt Respiratory Disease in Cats

Dr. Aki Tanaka puts passion into practice

By Heidi Jeter

Aki Tanaka always wanted to provide a better life for unwanted animals. It's one of the reasons she became a veterinarian. While in veterinary school in Japan, she spent two summers volunteering at the Scottish Society for Prevention of Animal Cruelty. There, she realized shelter medicine was the area she wanted to pursue, and she felt that conducting research in the areas of infectious diseases, which affect so many shelter cats, would be particularly beneficial. Controlling these diseases is a critical aspect of shelter medicine, but, she says, disease management isn't always based on strong science.

"I saw firsthand how important and difficult it is to maintain shelter animal health so these animals can survive to find lifelong homes," Dr. Tanaka says. "It seems many important decisions about animal care, management and even building design are currently based on limited or no scientific evidence. This is the reason why I became more interested in research for cats."

Her interest led her to become the first recipient of a Morris Animal Foundation Feline Fellowship Training Grant. Dr. Tanaka applied to the program after learning about it through her mentors, Dr. Niels Pedersen and Dr. Kate Hurley at the University of California-Davis, where she is pursuing her master's degree. Thanks to a generous donation from cat lover Ann Hardy, Dr. Tanaka was granted a two-year fellowship to study upper respiratory disease in cats living in shelters. Though not usually fatal on its own, this disease often leads to euthanasia of shelter cats because it is highly contagious and time consuming to treat.

Dr. Tanaka is assessing environmental and group risk factors for feline respiratory disease in animal shelters. For 12 months, she and her team will gather daily data from 10 shelters in northern California. She will then evaluate how certain environmental factors in the shelter can affect the incidence of upper respiratory disease in those shelters. Dr. Tanaka hopes to identify the practices and situation that either favor or prevent disease. The ultimate goal is to use the information to improve the lives of cats in shelters, but Dr. Tanaka says the experience has been invaluable to her as well.

"By going to the shelters everyday, I acquire strong skills in handling various kinds of sheltered cats, assessing animal behavior, managing sheltered animals, daily turnover of

animals, incidence of diseases and outcomes and actual practice at the shelters,” she says. “I realized again the importance of scientific research for sheltered animals, and every change we make should be based on scientific evidence.”

Morris Animal Foundation is pleased to fund Dr. Tanaka’s research into upper respiratory disease. The future of improving feline health relies upon new scientists who want to find solutions that will prevent, treat and cure feline diseases.

“I honored to have this opportunity,” Dr. Tanaka says. “My ultimate career goal is to make the world a better, safer place for cats, and I would like to fulfill this through continued participation in academia and research devoted to shelter animal health.”

We are confident that Dr. Tanaka is well on her way to making a big difference in the lives of cats.

Thanks to the positive impact of this study, the anonymous donor who funded this fellowship will fund an additional feline fellowship.