Thinking INSIDE the Box

Inappropriate feline elimination is the leading behavioral complaint of cat owners. It is important to find the cause of the problem before treatment is initiated. The 3 main diagnostic categories are medical problems, marking, and toileting problems. A complete physical examination and careful history taking are the first steps. Historical information should include information about the frequency and pattern of elimination, locations, and behaviors. Types of litter as well as the number and location of boxes should be noted. If medical problems are ruled out, a behavioral diagnosis should be obtained. A distinction should be made between marking behavior and selecting a place to eliminate other than the litter box. If there is more than 1 cat in the household, fluorescein dye strips (6 large, 9-mg fluorescein/strip) can be put in a gelatin capsule and given to the cat. The urine will fluoresce more than untreated urine under a black light. Crayon shavings can be put in food and fed to individual cats to determine the offender when inappropriate defecation is the problem. If urine-marking behavior is the problem, a synthetic analogue of feline facial pheromone may be beneficial. The product is sprayed directly on the places soiled by the cat and other prominent locations in the environment. A plug-in diffuser is also available and appears to help decrease vertical urine marking in multiple-cat households. Treatment of toileting problems focuses on the litter box and litter. There should be 1 litter box for every cat in a home plus 1. Trial and error is used to determine the choice of litter. Uncovered boxes are preferred because it is easier to see whether the box is clean and they serve as a reminder not to forget to clean them daily. Areas of inappropriate elimination need to be cleaned and made as inaccessible as possible.

COMMENTARY: Many cats are placed in shelters or are euthanized because of inappropriate elimination. This article reminds us that although it is challenging, it is not impossible to get the cats to use the litter box. A therapeutic plan requires a commitment from the pet owner. —The Editors