



Playing detective...

A day in the life of a cat behaviour counsellor

Vicky Halls investigates elderly Oscar's 'toilet indiscretion': was it a cry for help?

I have a big soft spot for elderly felines; I see them as incredibly wise and noble creatures and am particularly impressed by the way in which they train their owners over the years to provide them with a dotage that befits their needs. They have the warmest, softest beds in the house, the widest variety of food, comfort and entertainment on demand – literally day and night in some cases – and give in return as much or as little as they see fit, depending on mood. What a wonderful existence. So you can imagine how sad I was to see Oscar's perfect retirement evaporate over a 'little toilet indiscretion'.

Oscar's owner, Sarah, called me on advice from her vet to help her to tackle a rather unpleasant turn of events that had occurred recently. It had been a gradual decline in behaviour, in Sarah's words, a few incidents here and there over a period of months but increasing in frequency to its current level of nastiness. Sarah was referring to house soiling; the problem that appears irritating and annoying in theory but can wreck homes, relationships and social lives in the blink of an eye. Sarah's predominant emotion was one of confusion as she couldn't understand how Oscar's exemplary behaviour for 15 years had suddenly deteriorated to a state of anarchy. Why the dirty protest? He was spoilt beyond belief and surely had the perfect life?

A thorough investigation

All cases need to be assessed carefully and always after a thorough veterinary investigation. This is never more relevant than in cases of the elderly as so many 'behaviour problems' that are brought to my attention in cats in their twilight years are manifestations of disease. One of the most common problems seen in elderly cats is a breakdown of normal acceptable toilet habits. If the urination or

defecation is widespread, looks abnormal in colour or consistency or is deposited while asleep or at rest then a medical reason will probably become evident on veterinary examination and no further behavioural intervention is required. Also, diseases such as kidney failure, hyperthyroidism or diabetes mellitus, common in the elderly cat, are associated with increased urine production and this often results in any litter trays provided becoming heavily soiled. This may deter cats from using them if they are not maintained more frequently. Sarah's vet had investigated any potential bladder or bowel issues and was satisfied that Oscar was healthy in that respect and suggested that I took the opportunity to assess Oscar at home before he carried out any further tests that may add even more stress to an already anxious old boy.

I visited Sarah and Oscar and, together with the pre-consultation questionnaire that all owners complete prior to my visits, I had the opportunity to see the home environment, inside and outside and spend some time discussing the problem. I am always looking for changes in routines and lifestyle as these often give clues to the underlying causes of problem behaviour. In this case, a few things were particularly relevant:

- Sarah reported that Oscar didn't come up to bed anymore; she was worried this was a reflection of their deteriorating relationship
- Oscar wasn't going outside much recently
- Oscar had always had a litter tray in the bathroom upstairs, but it had been used less and less frequently over the past couple of years, in favour of a patch of soil outside the back door
- He was miaowing to be let out through the back door in preference to the cat flap; Sarah saw this as a sign of his newly developed contrary nature
- Oscar didn't want to look out the window anymore; one of his favourite pastimes previously when he was indoors

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All I kept thinking was "Oscar doesn't *want* to do these things anymore or *can't* do them?" I doubted that any changes were, as Sarah suspected, a manifestation of his declining love for her. My suspicions were confirmed when Sarah said she had tried to carry him upstairs at night to encourage him

to restore his more sociable nocturnal habits but all he had done was make a big fuss about jumping off the bed and bumping loudly downstairs in 'bunny hops'. Here lay the possible answer: was Oscar in pain?

The underlying problem

Osteoarthritis is a common disease in cats and, until fairly recently, greatly under-diagnosed in general practice. It can cause a significant amount of pain and discomfort in the elderly and affect mobility, preventing them from having the lifestyle that they previously enjoyed. In Oscar's case, if I was right and he was suffering from osteoarthritis, he was reluctant to go upstairs because of the discomfort, unable to jump on the windowsill anymore and reluctant to use the cat flap as it involved a range of movement that his poor legs couldn't manage. The idea of using the outdoor soil patch exclusively for toileting was unthinkable. Old age comes with a lot of insecurities and being less than mobile means cats are less able to defend themselves outside. Poor Oscar had found a place in the corner of the living room that was as good a place as any to adopt as a toilet *and* it was on ground level.

Oscar's vet, after further investigation, diagnosed the condition as we had suspected and Oscar was put on an anti-inflammatory medication to ease the discomfort. We then had to make sure that the environment was adapted to suit his needs and cater for his mobility problems.

Sarah placed a litter tray in a discreet corner – well away from windows, the cat flap, food and water – on the ground floor. It was a large, shallow tray to enable him to get into it with ease and turn around without too much bending and flexing. She used a fine, sand-like litter that Oscar had always favoured in the past but removed the polythene liner that she had previously used. Older cats often get their claws caught in carpets and other materials and I was concerned that he may catch them in the litter liner and potentially lose his balance. Once Oscar found and used the new facilities, the area of carpet in the living room that he had used as a makeshift toilet was cut out and the floor treated with an enzymatic cleaner before replacing the soiled carpet and underlay with a new piece.

Sarah also created a series of ingenious steps and ramps to give easy access to all Oscar's favourite windowsills and perches. Sadly, he really wasn't too keen on using the stairs but the medication did mean that, on occasion, he spends some quality time on the bed again. Sarah abandoned the cat flap in favour of escorted trips outdoors so that Oscar could still have a presence in his old territory with the knowledge that a 'minder' was on hand should any other cats be around. Slowly but surely, Oscar's comfortable retirement was restored, as was the relationship between owner and cat. ●

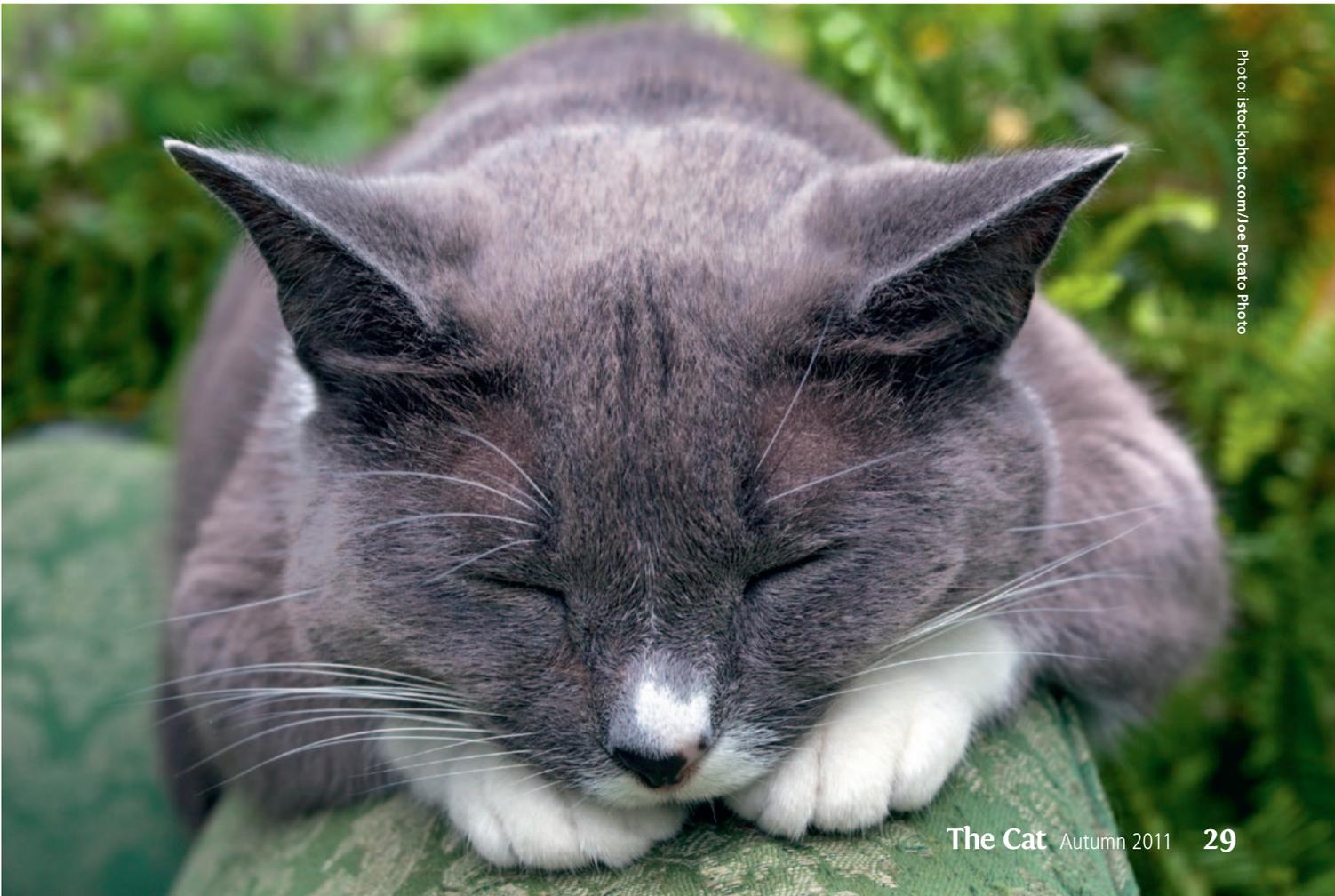


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