SUMMARY

It was the aim of this study to give an overview of the present situation of small exotic pets (lagomorphs and rodents) in German animal shelters and to assess their housing conditions from the veterinarians point of view. Guidelines for these pets should be developed especially for the following species: chinchilla, degu, gerbil, hamster, squirrel, rabbit, mice, guinnea pig and rat.

The housing conditions of the species mentioned above were examined in ten German animal pounds. The investigations included a visit and inspection of the individual grounds, particularly the small exotic pets' facilities. Temperature, humidity and light intensity were measured indoors to determine the climatic conditions under which the animals are kept. The cages' dimensions were taken and the various bedding materials and equipments were examined and compared with the German law's requirements as well as literature advices for pet owners.

The following results were obtained:

A maximum of 50 % of German animal pounds seems to be prepared to take care of small exotic vertebrates. Some of them refuse to accommodate squirrels, gerbils, mice or/ and rats. They also pass them on to regular customers as feed for other animals. The percentage of these pets related to the whole population within animal pounds varies between 3,5- 35 %, 23,4 % in average. Rabbits take the major part and squirrels and degus are considered to be the most rare visitors.

All small pets were housed in one and the same room with dogs, cats, ferrets and other, partly free-running, beasts of prey. Day-active species were not separated from night-active animals.

The indoor-climate fluctuated massively round the recommended values. Temperature ranged from 14,0 to 21,8 °C, possibly reaching 35 °C in certain places during summer. Humidity was between 25- 60 %, light intensity varied from 3 to 40.000 Lx. The shortest period of illumination was one hour per day and the interval reached up to twelve hours in other animal shelters. No time switches were used.

Open-air enclosures were not protected from cats or birds of prey. The managers reported several accidents. Sometimes the indoor facilities were not safe from wild rats access.

Quite often aquariums and terrariums were used for housing mice (50 %), degus (46 %), gerbils (33 %) and hamsters (32 %). The most dangerous fault in caging material concerned
the wire mesh. Too large distances inbetween involved the danger of traumatization or escape. Cage sizes were always satisfactory and bigger than minimum space requirements for laboratory animals but hardly ever met the floor area recommendations for pet owners. As an exception neither of the cages for squirrels fulfilled the dimensions asked by the government (BMELF 1986).

All the cages were poorly equipped and the only distraction for guinea pigs was some wood to gnaw at. The hamsters’ special running wheels were never safe in use.

Very few animal shelters had set up some kind of quarantine area or a room to isolate and treat sick animals nor did they put new small vertebrates in quarantine. If they did so, they never met the Incubation period of any important infectious disease. Prophylactic measures were rare and only rabbits are vaccinated against myxomatosis or RHO in some cases. The cleaning methods and procedures did not fulfil hygiene standards.

In conclusion the animal shelters are willing to put up small exotic pets in housings that meet the specific requirements. They regularly fail to do so because of a lack of knowledge about the various species. Certainly the financial background is rather poor and restricts the possibilities in many cases. These observations indicate the need for intense education on the species' biology, behaviour and needs as well as practicable ways of housing.