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Note: Abstract

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A SURVEY OF COMMON RABBIT HANDLING METHODS AND REASONS FOR THEIR USE

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Rabbits are both popular pets commonly seen within veterinary practices, and frequently used in laboratories in the United Kingdom and elsewhere. However, to date there is minimal research that has investigated why and how people handle rabbits and why they choose to use such methods. In addition, few studies have considered the sources individuals use to learn about rabbit handling and their reasons to not use specific handling methods. Therefore, to investigate this, five handling methods were chosen that were frequently reported within pet owner, laboratory and veterinary rabbit literature (see figure 1). An online questionnaire gathered data about participants' experience of and views about these methods. The survey was distributed through social media and through conference attendance. Inclusion criteria were being a UK resident and currently or previously worked with or owned rabbits. In total, 2644 responses were gathered. The majority of respondents (90.3%) were located in England, currently owned rabbits (83.2%), and had more than one rabbits (71.2%). A variety of work settings were represented and wide range of years of experience with rabbits. Of the five handling methods, the most commonly used was holding the rabbit against the chest whilst supporting its weight (method B) (86.2%) and the least common was Scruffing the rabbit whilst supporting its weight (Method E) (15.3%). Though several reasons were given, moving the rabbit was the most frequently reported reason for using four out of the five methods. The most common rationale for not using a method was the respondent considering it to not be a suitable way to handle rabbits. Participants gained knowledge about rabbit handling from a wide range of sources, primarily from books and veterinary practices. While this research indicates public awareness of the negative welfare consequences of some methods, as indicated by a minority of participants using Scruffing, clearly more work is required to promote suitable handling, regardless of why the animal is handled. These decisions should be based on evidence, and more research is required to fully understand the implications for rabbit welfare of the various handling methods used, both those discussed within and outside this study.



Figure 1. Common handling methods: a) under arm, b) against chest, c) in front of chest, d) placed on back, e) scruffing (Photographs taken by C.F.E. (author 2)).