

T-3.7 Policy on Dangerous Dogs

Policy

The World Veterinary Association recommends education of the community in responsible dog ownership as the most effective means of minimizing problems associated with unwanted aggressive behavior of dogs, stray dogs and communicable diseases (zoonoses) associated with dogs, such as rabies, hydatids and visceral larval migrans, that may adversely affect humans.

Recommendations

The World Veterinary Association encourages its member organizations to :

- Promote education of children at school, dog owners and professionals, such as veterinarians and dog trainers, in the appropriate methods of socialization of puppies to humans and other dogs at an early age.
- Promote dog training programs in the dog-owning community.
- Promote responsible dog ownership and humane methods of controlling the breeding of unwanted dogs in the community.
- Promote public education and community health programmes that will assist in the control and management of those diseases that may pass from dogs to humans (zoonoses).
- Discourage the adoption of breed-specific legislation related to dangerous dogs, until a proper risk analysis has been carried out.
- Promote a mandatory identification system for all dogs which is globally compatible by the use of an internationally recognized standard.
- Encourage research in such fields as dog behavior and its genetic, environmental and ethological background to identify the incidence and circumstances of dog biting and other unwanted behaviours.

Background

Over the past few decades, the ownership of dogs as companion animals has increased. There are identified social and health benefits for the dog owning individual and the community. However, as the World's population has become increasingly urbanized, the close interaction between dogs and man has led to an increased incidence of unwanted dog bites in the human population. In some cases people have been seriously injured or killed. In some countries, dog bites have led to cases of human rabies. In addition to injuring people, aggressive and uncontrolled domestic and feral dogs also attack other domestic animals.

The vast majority of domestic dogs will not bite people or other animals unless provoked. Dog bite injuries may be caused by various factors, such as uncontrolled playing behavior, lack of proper training, fear, pain, and inappropriate offensive or defensive reactions. Some dogs are used for illegal purposes by criminals and are trained to be aggressive; others are specifically kept for fighting purposes.

Dog bite injuries attract adverse publicity. Serious incidents involving dangerous dogs in several countries have sparked strong public reactions and have led some governments to try to address this problem through legislation directed against dogs.

Education

WVA strongly believes that the most effective means of preventing and controlling unwanted dog aggression is through education of the dog owning public to achieve responsible dog ownership.

Education of owners and a responsible attitude to obedience training of dogs is expected to lead to a decreased risk to the public. There is a variety of opinion relating to the education of dogs and owners and this area requires further research and development.

Veterinarians can assist the public with correct advice on how to choose the type of dog most suited to the particular needs of the prospective owner.

Early socialisation of puppies with humans and other dogs and ongoing dog training together with owner education are the most effective ways of reducing the number of dangerous dogs in the community. Veterinarians are encouraged to take the initiative, at the first possible opportunity, in cases where pups are displaying inappropriate or aggressive behaviours.

Veterinarians can also provide referrals to people with appropriate qualifications in animal behaviour modification to assist their clients to train their dog.

Humans unintentionally provoke many dog attacks. Knowing how to deal with an approaching dog and what to do in the event of a dog fight or dog attack is important for public safety. This type of education needs to be given to children at an early age (primary school age), as children are often involved in unwanted dog bite injuries.

Owner responsibility

Owners of all dogs have a responsibility to use appropriate methods of restraint for their dogs to ensure public safety at all times.

In those cases where the problem originates from the criminal use of dogs, control measures should be directed at those concerned.

It must be recognised that certain people will keep dogs specifically for aggressive purposes. Some dogs are bred and kept for (illegal) dog fighting and other dogs are trained to attack people, either for protection, revenge or criminal activity. These people often select large, dominant types

of dog and encourage behaviour characteristics that lead to the development of dangerous, anti-social dogs.

Because all dogs are individuals and behave differently, it is scientifically unsound to identify a particular breed as a dangerous breed. All breeds of dog, big and small, are capable of aggressive and antisocial behaviour under certain circumstances. Large breeds of dog are potentially capable of causing more serious physical injury than small breeds. In the eyes of the community, some breeds have been identified as a symbol of dog owner irresponsibility. It is imperative that aggressive behaviour statistics be analysed statistically to determine if any specific breeds of dog are more commonly implicated in dog bite injuries before condemning specific breeds. This can only be done if both the breed of dog and the owner are positively identified.

Identification

Mandatory identification of dogs can be an effective measure to link an individual dog involved in an aggressive incident with the person legally responsible for the care and restraint of that animal.

Veterinarians should not be expected to accurately identify unregistered breeds and / or crossbreeds on the basis of 'visual assessment only' because of the frequent lack of correlation between genetic makeup and physical characteristics.

Research programmes

Comprehensive surveys on dog bites are required, both to provide background information and to allow for the monitoring of the efficacy of any control measures on a country by country basis. Accurate identification of individual dogs is the key to such surveys.

Further research is required to ensure that good scientific evidence is available to support the development of a proper risk analysis and risk management of the aggressive behaviour of individual dogs. Preliminary results in the fields of genetics, behaviour, neuropsychology and neurophysiology suggest that effective scientific protocols can be developed to address the issues of breeding, individual assessment and training.

Testing programmes

There is some evidence that aggressive behaviour has an inherited component. It is important to determine the genes involved, and to develop controlled and responsible breeding programmes, supported by simple testing procedures.

Behaviour is also influenced by the environment in which the dog lives from birth onwards. The testing of an individual dog's predisposition to show aggression can allow owners to take appropriate steps to prevent any aggression.

Legislation

To attempt to control the negative aspects of the dog-human interaction, different countries have implemented various legislative strategies. Legislation and regulations should provide sufficiently robust mechanisms to deal with irresponsible owners and their dangerous dogs.

Although some countries have adopted breed-specific legislative measures, there is no scientific or statistical evidence to suggest that these effectively reduce the frequency or severity of dog-bite injuries to people. To date, no scientific criteria have been identified by which it can be determined that a dog is dangerous by simply describing its breed or other physical parameters. Breed-specific legislation has been shown to be difficult to apply, due to the problem of accurately defining and identifying breeds and breed types. This has been a major source of controversy and legal interpretation.

Legislation specifying breed engenders a false and dangerous perception that those breeds not listed will not show aggression. Aggression is a normal canine behaviour and can be shown by a dog of any breed, mixed breed or type.

Breed specific legislation does not discriminate between individual members of a breed, many of which may not be predisposed to aggressive behaviour. Because of this, all dogs of a specific breed, regardless of their behaviour, may be subject to the same legal restrictions and requirements (e.g. castration).

Disqualification of owners and restricted movement of dogs identified as 'dangerous' should be applied whenever deserved. Other measures such as muzzling the dog when in public and euthanasia where appropriate should be considered to control aggressive dogs.

The concept of licensing trained dog owners should be strongly supported. Dog owner education and the issuing of owner >competency= certificates permitting dog ownership would be a positive part of community education.

Accurate dog identification is an inherent part of tracing dog ownership and identifying dogs involved in attacks on people or other animals. Dogs need to be positively and permanently identified and registered to an owner or community. There is always a cost associated with this identification and registration which must be met, even if it is a one off cost borne by the owner, such as a microchip). Even stray animals can be positively identified in this way and the cost should be born by the community.

