

# The provision of animal services to Councils by veterinarians in practice

**Ross A. Perry**

## ANIMAL SERVICES PROVIDED TO COUNCILS BY VETERINARIANS

The services provided depend largely upon the requirements of the 'Council'. The term 'Council' is placed in inverted commas, because so often it is not what Council wants but what certain individuals - employees of Council or occasionally Councillors who sees political mileage in an issue - want. The influence of personalities and power politics, at whatever level the people are involved, is very strong. Power politics is not confined to Council employees but also involve members ('activists') of some of our 'most reputable' animal welfare organisations and over the years I have become convinced of the wisdom of the statement 'All is not what it seems'!

Services include but are not restricted to:

1. Killing of unclaimed dogs, vicious dogs and dogs in gross pain. This appears to be the major animal service Councils currently seek from veterinarians. Unfortunately Councils are like so many farmers of old who only called in the vet for 'fire fighting' - usually after they have consulted every unqualified person they knew. Prevention is more cost effective than 'fire fighting' and, thankfully, some Councils are changing.
2. Killing of other animals that sometimes come under council jurisdiction. This includes such situations as horses hit by cars after midnight, abandoned sheep and goats and mauled waterfowl from Council parks and ponds.
3. Provision of emergency treatment to injured and sick 'stray' dogs
4. These are usually animals to which Council's rangers or dog catchers had been called by some member of the public. This often includes:
5. Provision of temporary holding facilities for such animals (ie. 'hospitalisation')
6. Provision of boarding facilities for healthy impounded, surrendered or dumped animals, This involves providing the 'pound' for these animals until they are claimed or their 'time' has run out.
7. Contacting owners. In the case of dogs with some form of identification veterinarians may be required to contact their owners, or attempt to do so, on behalf of Council.
8. Performance of visual and sometimes physical health checks of impounded animals. This is commonly required where Councils operate, or contract out, 'their own' pounds, the purpose being selection for euthanasia or sale.
9. Performance of vaccinations. This is required where Councils operate or contract 'their own' pounds and is performed on those unclaimed animals not destined to be euthanased, prior to their sale and transfer to new owners. Some pounds now, and perhaps most in the future, also require heartworm tests, microchip implantation and desexing.

Veterinary services not utilised by most Councils

Vaccination of all overdue and previously unvaccinated animals

Microchipping of all impounded animals prior to their release to present or new owners

Desexing of dogs prior to being offered for sale

Desexing of already owned dogs/cats. This would be applicable if they are subject to repeat impoundings or produce litters which need to be surrendered

Educational talks on behalf of Council. These would be suitable for various community groups, notably school children and ethnic groups, the latter of which often have a fear of most pets due to the horror of rabies in their countries of origin.

Participation in consultative committees. This would be appropriate on matters pertaining to animals, including birds, and the natural environment, including planting of trees and shrubs.

Aquaculture in public lakes and ponds

Advice on feral animal control including foxes, stray dogs and cats, introduced birds

Training of dog catchers in animal behaviour. Emphasis would be on minimising fear in dogs and hence minimising the risk of being attacked or bitten while catching dogs.

Training of personnel in restraint of animals for euthanasia

Advice in dog pound management to minimise the risks of infectious disease outbreaks. This could also be extended to advice in policy development for management of pounds when outbreaks of infectious disease do occur.

Advice to Council on animal or fauna parks operated by Council. This could be extended to advice on proposed fauna parks and other enterprises involving animals and birds under Council jurisdiction.

## **THE ACT OF KILLING UNWANTED ANIMALS**

I have often wondered what would happen in Councils and vets all refused to participate in the 'humane destruction' of basically healthy domesticated animals... how long would it take for the community to address the roots of the problem?

- 'Humane destruction' is used advisedly.
- What is humane about killing well adapted, healthy, tame, domesticated animals who happen to be found doing what comes naturally to them?
- What is humane about killing one dog in front of another about to be killed dog?
- What is humane about having dead dogs lying about unbagged in the same room as the live dogs yet to be killed?
- What is humane about having to struggle with dogs being euthanased?
- Yet, I could write a book on incidents that I have witnessed or know of!

## **THE VETERINARIAN AS AN INDEPENDENT CONSULTANT OR ARBITER**

In the 1960s as a student employed by a vet I often attended the dog pound which at that time was located at the same property as a dog breeding stud, cat breeding stud and boarding facility. Outbreaks of infectious disease, especially distemper and perhaps associated with poor housing and management, and the resultant need to witness the destruction of many dogs remain as strong memories.

In the 1970s and 1980s Warringah Shire Council's dog pound was contracted privately to another gentleman who provided far better facilities for the dogs, including piped music and large dog runs. After a series of outbreaks of distemper Council agreed that all dogs impounded would be vaccinated at the first opportunity. This policy was combined with weekly and occasionally twice weekly visual inspection of each animal and each enclosure for animals with signs of pussy eyes and/or nose, cough, vomiting, diarrhoea, debility and depression. Any one or more of these signs resulted in the animal being allocated for euthanasia. This protocol markedly reduced the incidence of outbreaks of infectious disease and of complaints from other vets about dogs from the pound succumbing to infectious diseases.

A gentleman had an arrangement with Council, so he told me, that at the end of the prescribed period of impounding, he could buy any animal he wanted from Council for \$1 and become its legal owner. He would then sell it for whatever he could get, and he often got 'a lot'! If he didn't buy it, it would be put down. However, as already noted, things are not always what they seem.

Despite some wonderful attributes this gentleman had a peculiar, so I thought at the time, quirk of wanting to 'pull a swiftie' on the Council and/or the attending veterinary surgeons, given just a fraction of a chance. I am sure I saved Council many hundreds of dollars over the years, and probably missed saving more when I was more naive. Animals that had been up for sale the previous week, which had subsequently developed signs of disease, were somehow owned by Council again. Similarly animals purchased for a nominal fee which proved to be unsaleable over several weeks were somehow repurchased by Council, presumably without the knowledge of its officers.

I found that often I was killing somewhere between 10 and 30 dogs 'at a sitting'. I found it to be important that I personally saw that the dog I was seeing to be euthanased- its breed description, colour, sex and age estimation - marched its recorded description. I also found that it was very important to count the number of heads, rather than the number of body bags and see which matched the number of dogs being claimed to have been euthanased.

The discrepancies could vary up or down, depending on factors such as animals escaping from the pound (could this mean having their unofficial freedom being negotiated prematurely?) and animals dying in the pound during the preceding week. Where there was a particularly potentially valuable (if it could be sold alive) dog due for destruction, or where there was some unofficial demand for dogs as experimental animals for fee or reward discrepancies were common. I cannot be sure, except discrepancies were more frequent with some pound keepers, and less frequent when their employees were on duty. Be this as it may, it draws attention to or introduces the subject: Pulling a Swiftie, or ways and methods of defrauding Councils, as gleaned from my experiences with six Councils, their employees and the general public.

## **'PULLING A SWIFTIE'**

Most methods involve falsification of records, or failure to maintain adequate records. Inadequate description and inadequate identification (for example, lack of microchip) of dogs provides or leaves opportunity to 'pull swifties' that would otherwise be thwarted. A photographic record goes some way to addressing this problem, but in my opinion it should be compulsory for each and every dog which is impounded to be microchipped prior to it being released back to the owner or for sale to a new home. The cost of reimbursing the vet for this procedure could easily be recovered by Councils.

It is not uncommon for people who have had their dog impounded to attempt to find way of having it unofficially released without Council's knowledge before it is due for destruction - without paying Council's fines etc. It is less common for people to leave their dog impounded until it is due for destruction or sale and then to try to buy it back for a fraction of the Council's fine fee.

Pulling a swiftie on vets occurs when some councils do not have their own staff employed as dog catchers but instead contract dog catchers to work so many hours, or cover so many miles patrolling the streets within the Council's area each week. Council may nominate the vet animals are to be taken to, but some dog catchers have contracts with more than one Council and a particular vet may find him or herself somehow missing out on the bread and butter middle of the day work and only getting inconvenient work. Some such dog catchers also want animals which are surrendered directly to the vet to be put through their books as dogs caught off the street, thus entitling them to some bonus. Failure to cooperate with such practices may see dogs going unofficially to other vets or pounds.

## **CONTRACTS WITH COUNCILS**

Some matters which should be given consideration include:

- Time frame: duration of contract
- Hours of service at agreed prices
- After hours services and facilities for depositing animals
- Daily boarding fee, maximum 7 or 14 days
- Size of animals
- Dumped or impounded litters
- 'Atypical animals' such as sheep, goats
- Dangerous animals

- Euthanasia and disposal fee. This may be applied for council or police ordered euthanasia but waived for the option of selling or homing dogs after the prescribed period.
- Written vs. phoned or faxed authority to euthanase each animal
- Emergency treatment fees and whether these are subject to a ceiling limit or individual negotiation with Council depending on circumstances and prognosis
- Quality of facilities, level of care, proximity, ease of parking, prompt attention (so Council staff can get on with other duties!), personal relations. These are factors that can make or break Council contracts!
- Hours during which public can inspect impounded animals to see if their missing animal is impounded
- Hours during which animals can be released from the pound
- Forms, authorities, payment details (to Council vs. vet), receipts etc. as basis for release of dog from pound
- Permits to buy or become owner of dogs and to sell or destroy
- Agreements re policy on vaccinations, desexing, microchips etc. etc.
- Exceptional circumstances arrangements

## **TENDERING**

Councils are supposed to call tenders periodically but sometimes these are not widely publicised.

### **Getting paid by councils**

Auburn Municipal Council could teach many a great deal about book work, procedures and records:

1. Dual Polaroid photos are taken of each dog just before it is admitted to pound.
2. A numerical past year's dog tag in sequence is allocated to each dog and fitted to a collar applied to the dog
3. Description on paper matches dog
4. Efficient, straight, easy and fair to work with

Another 'Municipal Council' could teach many a lot about saving the lives of dogs about to be killed. However, some of the methods may be found to be 'unofficial', and some may give rise to the questions of misrepresentation and pulling strings, including heart cords, especially in advertisements for dog of the week etc.

## **INCENTIVES**

One cannot but wonder what would cause a Council to change from a cheaper, very efficient, pleasant, and straight-forward service by a particular contractor to an apparently more expensive, less convenient (further away), less prompt service facility - without there being any known problems with the former service.

## **BENEFITS TO VETERINARIANS FOR PROVIDING ANIMAL SERVICES TO COUNCILS**

### **Financial reward**

The value of this on paper will depend on the contract negotiated, but needs to be depreciated by many factors such as those listed below. However, if a vet has cages and dog runs which are being under-utilised most of the year except, for example, during school holidays, then operating a dog pound can be likened to having a constant supply of boarders (albeit nuisance boarders with nuisance owner) all the year around.

The financial reward can be increased a number of ways such as by insisting that any dog offered for homing or sale to a new owner:

- must be brought up to date with its vaccinations
- must first have a heartworm test
- must be desexed
- must be microchipped

The cost of these procedures, with some profit, is recovered in the sale price, and/or in part from Council or some animal welfare organisation or private sponsor.

## **Altruism**

Theoretically at least this may be a benefit

## **Introducing and exposing potential clients to your practice**

This may be of dubious value in view of the circumstances of the first impression: a dog pound!

## **DISINCENTIVES FOR VETS PROVIDING ANIMAL SERVICES TO COUNCILS**

Some councils are notoriously slow payers.

Some councils have staff who unofficially want to assume the role of deciding the fate of animals and the running of the pound. These individuals can interfere, hassle staff, or undermine official arrangements.

Operators of dog pounds will find a high percentage of their incoming phone calls concern lost dogs, the great majority of which are not impounded at the particular facility. Many of the people making these calls are distressed; some are abusive. Occasionally one is threatening.

Similarly, operators of dog pounds may find themselves attracting all sorts of people to the premises, some of whom may adversely impress one's established clientele. Many of these people want to actually see the dogs in the pound to make sure their dog is not hidden there. Some of these, and some others, have more than one purpose for wanting to come through the premises and see the pound ... they appear to want to 'case the joint' and some seem more than casually interested in the pharmacy etc.! The risk of theft must be increased.

When trying to find new homes for unclaimed dogs, prospective owners have either to be taken into the dog pound, shown photos of dogs available, or have dogs brought out of the pound by staff to show them. They want to ask questions which need to be answered and all this takes staff and time, often with the prospective owner deciding 'they'll think about it'. Other times, they want you to hold the dog for them for a few days and swear black and blue that they will come and get it on Saturday (they get paid on Friday!), but do they turn up? Many do not.

The net effect is unless you are big enough to have a special phone line, and someone allocated to take these calls, or unless you are so under worked as to have people sitting around twiddling their thumbs, the interruption and distraction effects of running dog pounds within a veterinary practice can prove very costly.

One needs to have a 'release form' which each new owner signs before having their selected dog vaccinated, desexed, microchipped or whatever. This release form needs a series of clauses that give some protection to the vet should the dog subsequently turn around and bite someone, get run over, develop parvovirus or whatever.

One needs to determine whether or not there are less stressful, less risky, more financially rewarding ways of utilising space and time other than operating a dog pound and providing animal services to Councils.

In my circumstances, I think the answers are rapidly becoming yes, yes, yes!

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Fax: (02) 746 8375 Urban Animal Management Conference Proceedings 1995 - Text copyright © AVA Ltd - Refer to Disclaimer

Principal of Homebush Animal Hospital with cages and boarding facilities for approximately 120 animals including impounded dogs 1992 to present. Principal veterinarian servicing privately owned dog pound contracted by Warringah Shire Council approximately 1972-1987 Intermittent attendance at Hornsby Council Dog Pound 1991. Provider of Dog Pound services to Strathfield Municipal Council 1992 to present. Provider of Dog Pound services to Burwood Municipal Council 1992-1994. Provider of Dog Pound services to Auburn Municipal Council 1993-present. Provider of Dog Pound services to Concord Municipal Council 1992-1994

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[UAM 95 Index page](#)