

Submission to State Governments on Dangerous Dog Legislation

Dr Kersti Seksel

AVA policy states that:

“ The AVA supports the development of dangerous dog legislation provided it refers to deed and not breed”.

“Targeting a specific breed is not appropriate. The main problems relate to irresponsible ownership and lack of education.”

Dog bites are a serious issue that are highly publicized in the media and governments are feeling pressured to respond with solutions. At present many state governments have passed or are investigating instigating breed specific legislation to address dog bite issues. Currently, breed specific legislation appears to mainly target the Pitbull Terrier, although other breeds can be added to the list, eg, Burdekin Shire Council, Queensland is considering five breeds – Rottweiler, Doberman, German Shepherd Dog, Bullmastiff and Pitbull Terrier. However, the decision should be based on scientific evidence and not emotion, as it is important both to legislators and the public to get it right.

Management of the issues associated with dangerous dogs is a significant issue for regulatory agencies worldwide. Many countries and some Australian states including NSW have introduced restrictions and/or bans on specific breeds of dogs. Overseas experience has revealed that breed specific legislation has failed to improve the incidence of dog attacks and dog bites. Many groups including the AVA and UAM are currently reviewing the issues to further clarify appropriate methods of managing dangerous dogs.

All breeds of dogs have a proportion of individual dogs that are aggressive towards humans. Control and management of known aggressive dogs is the way to effectively manage the problem. Unfortunately, regardless of legislation, there will always be a small minority of dog owners who are not socially responsible. Many veterinarians actively aim to reduce dog bites, through encouragement of activities such as socialisation and training of puppies (Puppy Preschool®) and dogs (Delta Society's Canine Good Citizens), support of Urban Animal Management and the AVA's PetPEP Program to increase education of children about pets.

BACKGROUND

Dogs are kept for many reasons such as companionship, sport, prestige or security (MacCullum & Beaumont, 1992; Willis, 1987). Numerous studies have also suggested that there are health benefits of owning pets, such as a reduction in stress, blood pressure, and serum triglyceride levels (Serpell, 1991; Edney, 1992).

Although there are many benefits of dog ownership, there are also known to be some difficulties. For example, dogs sometimes exhibit behavioural problems

which lead to a disruption of the human companion animal bond. Aggression of course, is one of the main problems.

From overseas experience breed specific legislation has proven to be ineffective in reducing the number of dog bites. Of concern is the fact that it may lull the public into a false sense of security in that there are no more dangerous dogs. The identification of breeds is also problematic in that neither phenotypically or genotypically is it possible to accurately do so. Additionally, the inability of enforcement of the legislation and cost of doing so is great, so alternatives are strongly recommended.

The definition of what constitutes a 'dangerous dog' is also problematic as aggression needs to be considered in the context in which it occurs. Several examples will be discussed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There is a need to achieve greater consistency across local governments in the handling of restricted and dangerous dogs. Some ways that this problem may be addressed include:

- Determine true nature of the problem at local level
- Involve all significant stakeholders
- Review sources of current ineffectiveness
- Establish realistic, enforceable policies
- Provide the resources for successful implementation
- Evaluate the results objectively
- Modify and reassess

Additionally, attendance by a veterinary surgeon to determine whether there are underlying medical causes for the behaviour and treatment by a veterinary surgeon for an underlying condition that contributes to the aggressive behaviour should also be part of the recommendations.

Regular seminars or workshops in canine behaviour, involving educating animal control officers from across each state and preferably across Australia, with a focus on achieving consistency in the approach to enforcement and appropriateness of penalties, would also be important in achieving the sort-after outcome of reducing dog attacks.

Additionally, a comprehensive public education and awareness strategy on responsible dog ownership should be developed. The strategy should utilise existing programs where practicable and introduce new activities in this area where appropriate.

In doing all of the above there is a need to recognise the emotional and politicised nature of dog attacks.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kersti Seksel
 Consultant Behaviourist
 55 Ethel St
 Seaforth NSW 2092
 Ph: 02 99491288
 Fx: 02 99496364

Kersti graduated in Veterinary Science from Sydney University and became very interested in animal behaviour while working overseas. To further her knowledge she went back to university, graduating from Macquarie University with a BA in Behavioural Sciences with a major in psychology. In 1992 she began developing the program of Puppy Preschools in veterinary hospitals around Australia. This interest led her to complete a MA (Hons) degree by thesis on the long and short term behavioural effects of puppy socialisation and training programs. She is a registered specialist in animal behaviour, one of only two Fellows of the Australian College of Veterinary Scientists in Animal Behaviour and a Diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists. She has studied at Cornell University, USA, University of Pennsylvania, USA, Guelph University, Canada and Queensland University, Australia and is a NSW Veterinary Surgeons Board registered Animal Behaviour Consultant. In 1999 she spent 7 months on faculty at the University of Pennsylvania, based in the Department of Clinical Studies, Animal Behaviour Clinic.

Kersti has presented at conferences and meetings in Australia, NZ, UK, Japan, Europe and USA. She has published numerous papers on animal behaviour in scientific journals, magazines and periodicals and is a regular contributor to print and electronic media. Currently she is a regular presenter on Channel 7 and on ABC radio on pet care and behaviour as well as columnist in *Dog's Life*, and *Your Garden* magazines on behaviour problems.