

# Education and training for sustainable dog health programs

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## ABSTRACT

The history of dog health and population control programs extends back over almost 30 years, with varying degrees of success on the record. One of the major limitations to this success has been a lack of sustainability, with too many programs foundering after a relatively short time. This paper explores the factors that need to be addressed in seeking sustainability, with emphasis on the role of education and training.

## INTRODUCTION

The first structured dog health programs for Aboriginal communities in Australia were delivered in the mid 1980s in the Katherine area (English 2000). The history of these activities since then has been a mixture of successes and frustrations, as a range of participants sought the best way to develop and deliver programs that were needed and sought by the communities in question. One of the main reasons for undertaking these programs in the first place was a belief that there was a strong link between dog health and human health. It was thought that if the health of community dogs could be improved that there would be similar improvements in the health of the people, with fewer skin diseases, enteric infections and other disorders. This simple proposition has since been called into question by a number of authorities, who point out that the available data do not support a direct link between dogs and human health. Nonetheless, there are anecdotal accounts of some improvements in human health when the dogs are treated, and it is fair to say that this aspect of dog health programs is still open for debate. Dogs certainly harbour a long list of potential human parasites and pathogens, but the extent to which these pose a direct risk to people in Aboriginal communities is the point being debated.

One of the principal issues in the story of these programs in Australia has been the question of sustainability. While there may be discussion about the technical or other aspects, there is general agreement that unless a particular program can be sustained over a period there is little point in starting it in the first place. This paper explores the issues surrounding this point, with emphasis on the role that education plays in achieving true sustainability.

## SUSTAINABILITY

The sustainability of dog health programs depends on a number of key factors:

- the program must suit a community's needs, with strong support for its implementation;
- the results must be visible and repeatable;
- both the community and the professional provider must be happy with the financial arrangements;
- the community must be able to undertake any specific

activities for which it accepts responsibility;

- the professional provider must be able to deliver a service when and where it is required, often in remote localities.

The first two points relate to the veterinary science involved in putting together a program that is likely to be successful in improving the health of dogs (and possibly other species) owned by community members, as well as in controlling the populations of dogs in a way that is acceptable to the people. Every community is different, and in every case a program will need to be tailored to the specific requirements of that group of people. There are no absolute templates for dog health programs. Options such as the surgical desexing and euthanasia of dogs must be discussed in detail so that there are no ambiguities. To achieve this understanding may require a period of careful and sensitive discussion on the part of the service provider, with nothing taken for granted. Having resolved what a community will and will not accept as a part of its particular program, it should then be possible to deliver a successful outcome in technical terms – with dog health clearly improving, fewer complaints about nuisance dogs and so on.

The veterinary science that is involved in providing a dog health program is not very difficult, once the socio-cultural and logistic issues are resolved. However, it is an understanding of this point that is central to the delivery of any dog program, for without this understanding it is almost inevitable that the activity will fail. It is also imperative for both parties to understand and agree on the financial aspects of any arrangements for delivery of a dog health program. In this instance there is little difference between these programs and any other veterinarian-client relationship. Misunderstandings and disputes over fees and charges are all too common in the wider community, and almost always stem from poor communication between the client and the service provider.

## EDUCATION AND TRAINING

In considering the education and training requirements that underpin the delivery of effective and sustainable dog health programs, the following points emerge:

- veterinarians who wish to undertake these programs will need specific training and practical experience in both the technical and socio-cultural issues that are critical to success;
- environmental Health Officers or other supervisors who are given responsibility for coordinating these programs will need to understand the aims and content of any particular program;
- environmental Health Workers or other local officers who are to participate directly in a dog program will need very specific training in the skills and knowledge that are required;

- community members who are selected to become part of a 'dog team' will require training in animal handling, administration of medications etc;
- public education for the whole community on responsible dog ownership, care and feeding of dogs (and other species), and animal welfare.

### VETERINARY EDUCATION

Veterinary curricula certainly deal with the parasitology, pharmacology, medicine and surgery required to undertake dog health and population control programs. Certainly an experienced small animal veterinarian would be capable of putting an effective program in place in technical veterinary terms, but the challenge would always be to appreciate the socio-cultural and logistic issues that must be addressed. Arguably the best way to gain such an appreciation is to work alongside an experienced person for a time, to gain confidence in the special knowledge and skills that are always going to be required on top of what might be called the 'basic' veterinary science. Thus, an ability to identify the local canine diseases and parasites, and to determine which ones are of significance, should not be beyond a competent veterinarian. Similarly, selection of appropriate treatment, control and prevention strategies might also appear to be a relatively simple matter. However, unless a careful and very specific process of identifying what the community will accept, and is willing to support is put in place from the outset, even the best veterinary science will not be good enough. No dog health program can succeed without strong community support, and if the community does not truly understand what is being proposed that support will not be forthcoming.

In order to give some background on these matters before they seek on the job experience in veterinary practices that are doing this type of work, veterinary schools can expose students to the broad issues that drive dog health programs. There is an intention within the new curriculum at the university of Sydney's Faculty of Veterinary Science to include such experience in the electives that are offered in the lecture free final year. This experience will hopefully be available within some 'partner practices' that agree to take students on a regular basis, and there is an intention also to place students with the NSW Department of Agriculture's dog health programs that are now operating in western NSW. This process should provide a pool of new graduates who have a good understanding of what can be achieved with these programs, and of what the major challenges and constraints are likely to be. Above all it should provide some understanding of the flexibility and common sense that will always be required for a good outcome.

### ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH OFFICERS

There will generally be a role for Environmental Health Officers (EHOs) or their equivalent in the coordination and delivery of dog health programs. This might start with assistance in identifying communities that have a need for and are likely to want a dog program. There would then often be a role in liaising with potential service providers, local medical centres and others who might be involved in putting together a proposal for consideration by the community.

Finally, there would presumably be a role in coordinating delivery of the program on a continuing basis, to ensure that it is sustainable.

EHOs will require training in those aspects of the programs that directly concern them, and will certainly need to understand what the components are likely to be. They will need to know enough about the veterinary science to understand what can and cannot be achieved, and to understand the pros and cons of options that might be considered for both health management and population control. A specific short training course would be appropriate, which could be delivered by regional tertiary institutions with support from veterinary schools or the local veterinary profession.

### ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH WORKERS

Environmental Health Workers (EHWs) or their equivalent are often employed by councils, with a range of duties in the communities that they serve. In the past, EHWs have been actively involved in dog health programs, in treating dogs with some medications, in record keeping and so on. This type of support is invaluable to the service provider, and can in fact make the difference between the success or failure of a program. Having this type of committed person on the ground, and visiting the communities on a regular basis, can be a vital element in achieving success.

The training required by an EHW could be delivered as a module during the initial training that is provided, with reinforcement on the job from the veterinarian. The relationship which would thus be developed would ensure that the EHW knew what was required to make the program work well.

### COMMUNITY DOG TEAM

In many cases it is useful to have a team of community members who are prepared to take responsibility for dealing with the dog issues that come up, including treating dogs on a regular basis. It is essential to seek out these people during initial discussions with the community, and to assist them in gaining the community's acceptance of their role. They will usually work closely with the EHW, if such a person is in place. These activities may or may not be considered to be a part of the CDEP, depending on local arrangements.

The training of a community 'dog team' will invariably be the responsibility of the providing veterinarian, assisted by the EHW. The exact duties and responsibilities of the dog team needs to be determined and agreed upon, with more than one person involved to cope with absences from the community. New people will need to be trained from time to time.

### COMMUNITY EDUCATION

In seeking sustainable improvements in the health and welfare of companion animals in Aboriginal communities there is a need for community education, just as there is in the wider Australian community. This can occur at all levels, beginning in schools and going through to specific programs delivered within communities. PetPEP may have a role in this process, but all possible means should be considered in seeking ways to change attitudes to dogs and their management. Unless this type of education is

viewed as an integral part of dog health programs, and unless it is specifically prepared and delivered on a regular basis, any gains that are made in dog health and dog welfare are likely to be transitory and therefore of no value at all. This has happened all too often in the past.

## CONCLUSION

There is more than enough knowledge and experience now available to develop a potentially successful dog health program for any community that wants one. It would also seem that there is large unmet demand for such programs across the country. The challenges in delivering and sustaining a successful program are often quite immense, and sometimes daunting. However, the rewards can be just as great for those who have the will to persevere. The real beneficiaries will be the dogs, who so often deserve better than they get. Education and training alone will not deliver this outcome, but neither will true sustainability be achieved without them.

## Reference

A.W. English (2000) *A review of the history and aims of dog health programs in Australia*. Proceedings of the 'Biglick' conference, Darwin NT, August 2000. In press.

## Dedication

To 'Pluto', a dog from Bickerton Island who now lives with my family in Sydney. He is a constant reminder of what a good friend all dogs can be, if they have the chance.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Tony English is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Veterinary Science at the University of Sydney, where he has been on the staff for 25 years. He is a large animal and wildlife veterinarian who became involved in dog health programs in Aboriginal communities while serving in the Army Reserve. After 35 years in the Royal Australian Artillery he had an opportunity to work for about 3 years in the late 1990s with the ATSIC-Army Community Assistance Program (AACAP), which took him to several remote communities in the NT. He is a founding member of the Biglick group.