

Indigenous community animal programs: training and education needs

Jack Shield

INTRODUCTION

Dog health programs have been operating now for more than 20 years in Australian Indigenous communities. It is 10 years since the main providers of these programs first met to discuss common interests and to improve the lot of community animals. Since then we have gathered as a group 3 times (including this meeting), formed useful alliances, adopted a name and Animal Management in Rural and Remote Indigenous Communities (AMRRIC) is now an incorporated body. Through this history one common thread has remained the recognition that education/training is the main key to the success of this work.

In Darwin in 2000, the Big Lick conference laboriously workshopped the issues of Dog Health Programs. Under the heading of 'Itches to be scratched' we listed, discussed and prioritized the challenges. At the top of the list that resulted was 'education and training' as the top priority of this organization. It rated higher than funding, culture and politics. That Darwin meeting drew up a list of workshop outcomes which further identified the education and training priorities. They included cross-cultural training, special emphasis on training environmental health workers and the importance of culturally 'proper' discussions with communities before any training occurred. Unfortunately that consensus and enthusiasm has not resulted in any of the hoped-for education programs. This was in spite of a challenging rebuke at the subsequent 2002 conference in Alice Springs. This ability of AMRRIC to identify problems and needs but not facilitate effective remedies is our biggest challenge.

One thing that has changed since the birth of Big Lick/AMRRIC is the addition into the equation of animal welfare as a major issue for most governments in Australia. This is important in that it gives some institutions the incentive (the obligation?) to look now at animals in Indigenous communities as not just a health issue but as a major issue of animal welfare. While the one issue, we know, can be treated with simple chemicals, the other comes with a complete new set of problems. For both issues however, education and training are critical.

The scope of this presentation covers not just the health and welfare of community dogs but also the welfare of livestock and game animals used by Indigenous people.

WHY IS EDUCATION AND TRAINING SO IMPORTANT?

Adopting a new behaviour requires some element of training or education. We are trying to introduce ideas of animal health and welfare into communities and everyone is entitled to know what that means. Where tasks are allocated, everyone must know what is expected of them: they must know how to do their jobs.

If this requires new skills, demonstration, practice and training must be a part of the process. The party with the information must be able to impart it to those who need it. The further the two parties are separated by age, culture, background and language the greater are the problems of communicating information from one to the other. Those of us with children (or parents) know instantly that age and generation have imposed barriers to our communication, even within the family. When the two parties are separated by not just a generation but by language, culture, values, history and tradition the problems of communication are immense. Without communication there can be no education or training.

When communicating with Indigenous people in remote communities we need to be reminded that they probably have difficulty with not only our words but also with many of the concepts and ideas we are introducing. For a large percentage of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, not only is English a second language, it is not the language in which they discuss issues among themselves or try to absorb new information. To add to this dilemma, there are very few white people who can speak to Indigenous people in their own language(s).

White visitors try to introduce new ideas to Indigenous communities and are frustrated later at the poor uptake of their projects. We seek out the locals with good English and a pleasant manner and try to 'sell' our programs through these people, hoping they will be the 'rapid adopters' of the Extension Methods text books. The success rate is not good. Added to this is the reality that in most cases the visitor has a tight schedule to keep, meetings to attend and no time to 'chat' with individuals however significant they may be. The end result of all this is that important messages or ideas are not delivered because the proper people have not been consulted in the proper manner. This is the main reason why so many 'good ideas' of white educators have not taken root in the minds of Indigenous people. This problem was covered at the Darwin 2000 Big Lick conference in presentations (the 'Top Story/ Bottom Story' concept) by Phil Donohoe and Richard Trudgeon.

WHO NEEDS THE EDUCATION AND TRAINING?

The quick answer to this question is 'everyone involved'.

Australian society at large needs to know that Indigenous people have strong attachments to their animals and are sad and embarrassed by their often deplorable condition.

Veterinarians trying to improve the situation of community dogs need to know that these animals sometimes have a spiritual value far beyond the comprehension of the non-Indigenous.

They need to know too that being prepared and armed to assist is not sufficient if the community does not understand the problems and the proposed solutions. Cross-cultural training is an absolute essential for veterinarians (or anyone) planning to work with Indigenous people. It is offered as an elective subject at some veterinary schools and is available post graduation from some government departments and areas of private enterprise.

Australian veterinary schools reserve placings for Indigenous applicants but appear never to meet their quota. There is no reason anyway to assume that Indigenous veterinary graduates would feel obliged or inclined to take their skills into remote communities. It is presumptuous even to assume that Indigenous graduates would be better equipped to communicate technical messages to a community audience unless it was of their own social group.

The consistently biggest cause of health and welfare complaints about community animals is the condition of the dogs: specifically the complaints are about mange and other external parasites, internal parasites, malnutrition and neglect. Clearly then **the dog owner** is a target for education programs. S/he does not need to be told the animal needs help: they already know that and want something done. They know too that there are dog nuisance problems and usually too many dogs. In most places the dog owners know about ivermectin programs and that these can improve the animals (even though many owners still attribute the skin conditions to having fed the dogs corned beef or allowing them to swim in the sea). The argument that mange is caused by microscopic mites can be difficult to accept but it is important to explain it as part of an owner education program: Rick Speare's approach of presenting live parasites for display through a projection microscope is very effective.

The people must also be properly consulted about any program. They need to know the extent to which their animals are to be interfered with and why. If animals are to be euthanased, there must be consultation about how dogs are selected and how the job is to be done.

Dog health programs are most effective where community members themselves do the routine treatments. This sometimes means CDEP employees from one of the council work gangs but, where they are available, the **Environmental Health Workers (EHW's)** are more appropriate to the tasks. Whether it be the EHW or another, **the dog program operator (DPO** for convenience here) is the person most in need of technical training and the one on whom the success of the program most depends. The sustainable future of dog health programs depends on identifying this person (persons, as more than one will be necessary), and providing them with the appropriate training. Training in a range of subjects is necessary and these are listed in Table 1.

It is most important that the dog program operator is chosen with care and consultation. This person needs to be not just competent but must also be acceptable to the community as someone to be entrusted with this training and the influence that comes with it.

There are of course other reasons for choosing carefully to ensure that the nominee does not quickly tire of the appointment and leave the job, thus wasting the investment in his/her training.

Perhaps the most important group to educate in a community is the younger sector, the **school children**, and animal welfare the most important topic. Like all children, Indigenous kids need to be taught the concept of duty of care to animals and that willful cruelty is unacceptable. The AVA PetPEP initiative is a highly successful vehicle for these messages in mainstream school curricula and efforts are being made to modify PetPEP for introduction into Indigenous schools. Special expertise is required to affect these adaptations both in language and content. Supportive material is already available in the form of activity books and story books which would lend themselves to adaptation for Indigenous groups. Adaptation in some cases would need to be considerable as for example some citizens of the Torres Strait may never have seen a cow but would relate immediately to stories and pictures of turtles and dugong or dogs. On the other hand they would see on TV and videos many animals they would never meet so perhaps direct personal experience is not the criterion that matters.

There are now many **Aboriginal graziers** in areas where their ancestors worked only as stockmen. This generation of cattlemen now has to deal with a much more complex set of problems including helicopter musters, road trains, hormonal growth promoters, national vendor declarations, livestock identification, chemical residues and market access requirements. Alongside these are increasing demands from our trading partners for assurance that Australian beef derives from cattle reared and slaughtered humanely. The whole Australian beef industry is struggling with this burden but the Indigenous owners more than most, because of their historical separation from management and often lack of education. Animal welfare rates high among the problems of Aboriginal graziers and is compounded by social and cultural difficulties. These sometimes result in higher than average numbers of complaints about the welfare of their stock. Education of Indigenous graziers about Duty of Care to livestock is a priority of Queensland's DPI. Part of the proposed strategy to progress this is to link animal welfare education with training on animal husbandry, branding, marketing, waybills etc. Indigenous groups are enthusiastic for 'cattlemen's schools'.

Sea turtles and dugong and other wildlife are prized game food in the Indigenous communities of much of northern Australia. Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders enjoy exemptions from some of the legal restrictions that prevent other Australians from taking these animals. Unfortunately though there are concerns about the way in which these animals are sometimes killed. Addressing this situation will involve more than just legislation and compliance issues. It will require a special approach with an appropriate education component.

Educational Subjects and Targets - Table 1

Table One attempts to summarise the main subject areas where education and training are needed and to match them with the ‘Target’ groups most at need.

Subject	Topic	Main Targets	Other Targets
Cross-Cultural Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> History Communication Community hierarchy of communication and influence Protocols of access Significance of dogs (?) Anthropology (?) Language (?) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participating veterinarians Other service providers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All others involved in programs Veterinary students
Animal Welfare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Duty of Care Codes of Practice Legal Agencies (DPI, RSPCA, Police, Councils) Cruelty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community pet owners Livestock owners School kids Hunters 	Whole community
	Animal Ethics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Researchers Teachers 	
Biology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Disease causation Infectious process Parasite lifecycles Reproduction Signs of disease Nutrition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dog program operators (DPO's) (=EHW's) Livestock owners 	Whole community
Medications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Modes of action Dose rates Restrictions Contraindications Application Aseptic technique 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> DPS's Livestock owners 	
Medicine storage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Legal requirements Physical requirements (temp, light, humidity) Record keeping Expiry dates Withholding periods Disposal 		
Euthanasia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Methods Technique Assessment Disposal of bodies 	DPO's	
Workplace Health & Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handling dogs Handling other animals Safety equipment Handling drugs 		

WHO ARE THE TRAINERS?

Table 2 lists some of the training providers that can and do meeting the needs of the participants. It attempts also to match the trainer with the trainee and subject area.

Some of these providers already train students in animal health and animal welfare subjects. Others would not have expertise in these fields and may need assistance to provide appropriate curricula and locate qualified staff. **Schools** for example do not normally teach about animals (except high school agriculture departments) but PetPEP successfully helps bridge the gap.

Community members would not usually consider themselves teachers. In fact custom would usually prohibit them from assuming to teach visitors to their community. As shown in Table 2 though, they are well situated to educate service providers in at least the cross-cultural area. Where one is fortunate enough to be educated by a community member it is knowledge to be valued.

Training Providers - Table 2

Provider	Trainee	Subject/Area Comments
TAFE	EHW	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Biology Medications Safety Cross cultural training Animal Welfare
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community Elders EHW's 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Vets Other service providers 	Cross cultural training
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> AVA/PetPEP Schools (primary and secondary) 	Community children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Duty of Care Responsible Animal Ownership
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Veterinarians ADF 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> EHW Work experience students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Biology Medications Safety Euthanasia Minor treatments and surgery
DPI	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> EHW Livestock owners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Firearms use Duty of Care Animal handling Animal husbandry Disease recognition
AQIS / NAQS		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Animal quarantine Exotic pests and diseases
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> DPI RSPCA 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community Community kids Hunters 	Animal welfare
DPI	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Researchers Teachers 	Animal ethics
Animal Management Officers trainers	DPO's	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Animal management Safety
Vet Schools	Veterinary Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Vet Science Cross cultural training
Churches	Communities generally	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Various (Sophisticated communications to remote areas)
Land Councils and linked organizations	Communities generally	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Various (Sophisticated communications to remote areas)

Providers like **RSPCA, DPI** and **NAQS** would also not usually be considered teaching institutions. There are examples though. NAQS has been recognized and applauded particularly for their work in education on quarantine issues in the Torres Strait. These organizations do have extension roles and budgets for public awareness. Where funds can be directed that way, they can be effective educators in animal health and welfare in Indigenous communities. In Queensland the DPI and RSPCA are not only welfare educators but also the enforcers of the Animal Care and Protection Act. There will undoubtedly be conflicts between the will to educate and the desire to use the law.

Some **church organizations, land councils and linked organizations** are now using sophisticated satellite communications systems to provide information networks to thousands of people in remote sites. Such user-friendly systems, using appropriate language and contacts could be invaluable in spreading all sorts of messages. There seems to be no reason why we could not access these media for animal health and welfare messages.

TEACHING TECHNIQUES/VEHICLES/STYLES

Whatever 'works' in mainstream teaching systems does not necessarily work for Indigenous people. We do know that state schools in Indigenous communities suffer low attendance rates and low matriculation rates. There is a move towards curricula more suited to Indigenous expectations. So how does an 'outside' body introduce what they (the outsiders) think ought to be taught? The answer lies in empowering the community to make the decisions themselves as much as this is possible.

There are numerous examples of extension publications that have been adapted for Indigenous consumption to 'sell' messages of health, quarantine, substance abuse, domestic violence etc. Target research is necessary to identify the appropriate language and style: experts are available to assist with this. The same message may have to be translated into a number of different languages.

Posters are widely used in Indigenous extension programs and appear to be effective. It would not be difficult to create simple posters to carry messages about animal health and welfare in the communities. To ensure the messages and language are appropriate, a poster competition could be held to allow Indigenous school children to show what they think.

A concern is that if a person featured in any material subsequently dies there may be community pressure to withdraw the publication from use. Live images seem to carry more impact than still ones and this should be utilized. A recent survey showed the television character that most impressed Indigenous school children was Doctor Harry of 'Harry's Practice'. Surely this suggests a media approach that could not be ignored. Perhaps Harry himself could be convinced to lend his support to the cause of Indigenous community animals. There has already been some discussion about the possibilities of personality culture but this has centred mostly on the desirability of using an Indigenous role model, Ernie Dingo or Kathy Freeman. The Harry's Practice story could mean that the appropriate role model need not be Indigenous at all.

ROLE OF AMRRIC / UAM / AVA

AMRRIC is now more than just a mob of people trying to provide community dog health programs. Veterinarians and the AMRRIC organization do not need to be teachers but we have the skills to show what needs to be taught and to assist with the delivery. Our combined experience and talent position us to be the lead agency in coordinating education and training for many of the groups identified above. There is much to be done in educating the educators on what is needed and how it can best be delivered. We need to be able to identify not only the needs but also the needy, and those with the knowledge. We should be able to provide input into curriculum writing, assessment criteria and many other aspects of the education system.

CONCLUSION

The problems with animals in Indigenous communities have changed little. Neither has the enthusiasm to find remedies. The dog health programs today follow the same basic pattern that was designed 20 years ago. We still need to learn, and apply, a lot about communicating with the people we seek to help. Two things that have changed are the formal 'arrival' of animal welfare as an issue and the increasing sophistication of methods to educate remote audiences. The challenge for AMRRIC is to apply 21st century technology to the task of dealing with ancient problems.

ABBREVIATIONS USED

AACAP	ATSIC-Army Community Assistance Program Conducts support programs (including animal health) in some Indigenous communities
ADF	Australian Defence Force. Mostly the army in this context
AMRRIC	Animal Management in Rural and Remote Indigenous Communities. Previously known as the Big Lick committee
AQIS	Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service Australian Government
AVA	Australian Veterinary Association
BRACS	Broadcasting to Remote Aboriginal Communities TV and radio service to remote communities (ATSIC funded)
CDEP	Community Development Employment Program An Australian government funded scheme for community employment
CYDN	Cape York Digital Network Remote area communications system funded under the Networking The Nation (NTN) program
DPI	Department of Primary Industries State Government department
DPO	Dog Program Operator A term used for convenience only in this document: the community member who 'runs' the dog health program
EHW	Environmental Health Worker. Community member with training in Environmental Health
NAQS	North Australian Quarantine Strategy. A surveillance organization within AQIS
PetPEP	Pets & People Education Program An AVA initiative to enhance children's understandings of animals
RSPCA	Royal Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals
TAFE	(College of) Technical And Further Education Tertiary education department

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jack Shield

Ph:

Fx:

Email:

Jack Shield is a veterinary officer with the Department of Primary Industries in Cairns. He has been working since 1985 on animal disease problems in Indigenous communities on Cape York and in the islands of the Torres Strait. With the recent adoption of the Animal Care and protection Act 2001 by the Queensland Government, Jack has taken on the additional role of Animal Welfare Project leader for Indigenous communities.