

Dog aggression - management & minimisation – UAM position

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ABSTRACT

The Urban Animal Management Advisory Group of the Australian Veterinary Association has for the past four years, been working towards the completion of a National UAM position statement on the management and minimisation of dog aggression incidents in Australia. This position statement has been gradually developed over the past three years through a series of consultation stages with UAM conference delegates at each consecutive annual conference. This paper is intended to set out the details of the penultimate draft. It is hoped that, with the assistance of conference delegates this week, the final adjustments can be made to the satisfaction of all.

PREAMBLE

It goes without saying that the only way to entirely eliminate dog aggression injuries is by banning the keeping of dogs in our community. A little reflection quickly determines that this option is neither acceptable nor practical. So we have to find another solution. To date, the main thrust of government dog aggression minimisation has been in the form of breed specific legislation and this is unfortunate.



The fundamental problem with breed specific legislation is that regulatory processes in Urban Animal Management *have* to operate on the premise that 'a dog is a dog'. Variations in UAM processes on the basis of breed differences alone, create an impossible tangle for the regulators.

Dog *breeds* are, when all is said and done, about appearance only. Breed definitions are nothing more than a framework for how recognized 'physical types' of dogs can be recognized on the basis of what they *look* like. There is limited justification for the use of 'breed specifics' in any part of UAM - including aggression management. There are other, better, things that can and *should* be done instead.

Perspective

The following are consensus positions on the overall issue of aggression and dangerousness in dogs. The following 14 'aggression perspective' elements were developed and endorsed by conference delegates at the 2002, Alice Springs UAM Conference.

1. The determination of dangerousness is context specific.
2. The concept of dangerousness of dogs can reasonably be extended to include dog-related incidents towards livestock and other animals.

3. There are a multiple of levels in the recognition of severity in dangerous dog incidents.
4. It must be recognised that a dog of any breed or type can be dangerous.
5. It is only from known incidents of aggression that determination of dangerousness can be made.
6. A standard method of recording dangerous dog (DD) incidents is important from the point of view of interpreting the data that can be so generated.
7. It should be possible for a national Dangerous Dogs (DD) information management system to cost-effectively collect, store and collate DD incident report data from across Australia to produce and then disseminate statistics, trends and benchmarks regarding DD incidents of all kinds.
8. In each case where a dangerous dog incident has occurred and come under the jurisdiction of a local authority, fines should be charged to the owners of the dog or person responsible, sufficient to cover (among other things) the cost of incident recording at the local authority as well as associated state and national registry expenses.
9. Legislation should be enacted preventing people who have bad records relating to DD incidents from keeping dogs (for a specified period of time).
10. A standard range of post-incident measures related to the grade of attack eg. signage, muzzling, fencing, penalties and public liability etc. will allow consistency in the handling of DD cases.
11. There should be uniformity between all states and territories in Australia in the way DD incidents are handled including investigation, recording and reporting.
12. All Animal Management Officers (AMOs) and other relevant authorities should be encouraged to promote measures designed to improve safety aspects of dog ownership to thereby minimise the risk of aggression incidents.
13. After an aggressive incident, a veterinarian of the authorities' choice, at the expense of the owner, should whenever possible be asked to examine the dog in question to check its state of health and add this data to the incident record.
14. All AMOs and other relevant personnel should be appropriately trained to ensure a good understanding of all the following:-
 - causes of aggression,
 - types of aggression,
 - signs of aggression,
 - prevention of aggression,
 - dealing with aggression incidents,
 - The National Policy on Dog Aggression.

This UAM position statement is intended to improve the balance of pet ownership benefit by minimizing the harm associated with aggressive dog incidents and injury.

SO, WHERE TO FROM HERE?

Dog owners and local authorities *both* have a duty of care regarding unacceptable dog behaviour and this includes particularly, aggressive behaviour. With the cooperation of these two parties, the umbrella of aggression risk minimization can be engineered to extend to both sides of the owner's front gate. If community expectations regarding aggression minimisation (by both owners *and* local authorities) can be made clear, consistent and where necessary enforceable, this UAM problem can be solved.

It is fair to say that the whole Australian community together with all authorities responsible for the control and management of dogs, want to move as quickly as possible towards improved methods of dog aggression risk management.



The goal is best practice in this aspect of community UAM and the process at present should be one of seeking continuous improvement towards this goal.

The pathway of continuous improvement depends, before all else, on information access.

The main problems concerning dangerous dog (DD) management at the present time, relate to a number of principle faults in information access:

1. impaired political perspective about the nature of dog aggression in general,
2. the lack of reliable records and good data about aggression incidents,
3. the lack of adequate public awareness about competent ownership and duty of care, and
4. the lack of appropriate/effective legislation/regulation.

Only the analysis of aggression incident details can provide the better statistics needed to fuel the process of continuous improvement in aggression risk management.

None of these needs can be addressed properly without first having a better base knowledge about the subject in question. It is essential that improved methods of aggressive dog incident *recording* be implemented as the first step towards better understanding the problem.

It will be an *extreme* error of forward planning if all these registries do not gather key aggression incident *data at the same time* as they gather the dangerous dog details for each case.

Victoria and South Australia are presently moving towards the establishment of state registries for dogs that have been declared dangerous by local authorities.

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Other state governments will follow suit in due course because this is such an obvious and essential step towards better dog aggression management.

COORDINATION IMPERATIVE

The Urban Animal Management Advisory Group of the AVA has developed the following suggestions for a standard template approach to the handling of dog aggression incidents that fall under the jurisdiction of local authorities Australia wide. This position statement is based heavily on the opinion and recommendation outcomes from delegate workshops at the National UAM conferences in Melbourne (2001) & Alice Springs (2002). The emphasis is on interstate cooperation.

All the following are important reasons why Australia's approach to 'aggressive dog' incident minimization should, if possible, be nationally coordinated by the use of a minimum standard process template:

1. **Microchips** - Microchip ID of 'aggressive dogs' will *never* reliably link animal to owner in a *national* context in the absence of clearly defined and mandatory national standards for the use of microchips in this application.
2. **Interstate mobility** - Management of 'aggressive dogs' *must* allow for the reality of pet animal mobility throughout all Australia. Like all other pet animals, 'aggressive dogs' will also be moving from town to town and state to state all the time. Declarations of dangerousness and the consequential owner constraints associated, *must* be consistent wherever the dog subsequently goes, *anywhere* in Australia
3. **Clarity of responsibility** – Responsibilities of dog owners and local authorities with respect to dog aggression response and prevention will, through uniformity, have greatest clarity if 'aggressive dogs' incident processes are consistent across all interstate and inter-municipal boundaries.
4. **Cost effectiveness** - Inconsistencies from state to state in DD policy and regulation will *do nothing* but add to problems of public uncertainty and confusion. Public awareness programs about this subject will be more cost efficient if everyone is working to the same plan.
5. **Data integrity** - The recording of details, after aggressive incidents have occurred, will provide *no* meaningful reference data or relevance in a national context *unless* everyone is working with the same framework of attack definitions and the same framework of circumstance/situation factor descriptors.
6. **Data analysis** - More data means better statistics. Better understanding of dog aggression and better options for aggression prevention, especially including better legislation & regulation, *can only* ultimately come from better statistics. The "pooling" of data that can provide quicker and better quality

statistics will never be possible in the absence of standard data gathering technique.

- 7. Performance benchmarking** - State and Municipal dog aggression management performance should be benchmarked and useful benchmarking will *never* be possible in the absence of a coordinated approach that provides the real chance that apples are being compared with apples when the time comes.

The UAM position in summary, is that only a nationally coordinated approach to 'aggressive dogs' management can provide the kind of results that the whole Australian community wants to see coming from better methods of 'aggressive dogs' management. Community benefits from minimised risks associated with dog-related incidents will be most efficiently achieved from a nationally coordinated approach.

THE TEMPLATE - GRADING OF DANGEROUS DOG INCIDENT

Level	Description	Consequence
1	Guard or patrol dog, restricted breed or other dog that has undergone any part or form of attack training.	a.Owner ideally would undergo an approved training course in responsible ownership b.Owner ideally would undergo an approved training course in responsible ownership c.May have to be kept in a specified enclosure d.Handlers of Patrol Dogs should be trained
2 & 3	2.Dog that exhibits unacceptable aggression without actually biting 3. Dog that bites once after provocation (where the response was unreasonable given the provocation)	a.Dog must be identified using an Australian Standard microchip with data on an accredited registry b.Owner and dog must undergo approved training courses c.Dog must be on leash and under control at all times when off the owner's property d.Must not have access from the driveway to the front door of the owner's property
4 & 5	4. Dog that multiple bites after provocation (where the response is unreasonable given the provocation) 5. Dog that has nipped or bitten once without provocation	a.Dog must be identified using an Australian Standard microchip with data on an accredited registry. b.Owner and dog must undergo approved training courses c.Dog must be on leash, under control and muzzled at all times when off premises. d.Must not have access to path between gate and front door and with an approved warning sign. e.Dog must be desexed at owner's expense. f.Must wear an approved identifying collar g.Owner must obtain public liability insurance to keep the dog.
6	Dog that multiple bites without provocation	Euthanasia unless owner prepared to make exceptional efforts including all of the above for levels 4 & 5 plus confinement to a child/dog proof enclosure
7	Life threatening attack (potential grievous bodily harm)	a.Euthanasia b.Prohibition order for owner

Issues relevant to community self regulation (non-legislative codes of practice) re: dog aggression minimization

- **Dog breeding** - Only dogs of an acceptable temperament should be bred. Dogs that show aggression during any aspect of showing or judging, should be disqualified from competition permanently.
- **Dog showing** - Show and obedience judges should enter into a code of practice that ensures

as much attention must be given to temperament as is to conformation and training.

- **Pounds and Shelters** - All dogs re-homed by pounds and shelters should pass temperament tests.
- **Dog purchase** - Prospective dog owners should be encouraged to evaluate the requirements and therefore the suitability of the potential pet dog prior to purchase.
- **Public awareness** - Information relevant to socialization, obedience training, competent/responsible dog ownership, owner obligations and responsibilities, local dog laws, basic animal welfare and bite risks should be available to all dog owners and especially with all puppies purchased.
- **Puppy socialisation** - Puppy school and normal positive socialisation experiences with other people and other animals during the critical interval of the socialization period of puppy development is necessary and should be encouraged.
- **Obedience training** - All dogs should be obedience trained sufficient to give owner/handlers adequate effective control.
- **Environmental enrichment** - All dogs need to be provided with an adequate activity program to minimize stress and tension that can lead to aggression.
- **Education of children** - instruction should be provided to children on how to behave around dogs.
- **Reality check** - Dog owners should be educated that all dogs have the potential to bite.
- **Guard dogs** - Owner/handlers should have appropriate qualifications and the dogs should be trained and restrained properly at all times.

KEY POINTS

1. This paper should be read in conjunction with that presented by Rick Walduck at this conference.
2. Breed specific legislation has limited usefulness in the overall picture of dog aggression risk management.
3. Information access is the key to continuing improvement in aggression management because with better knowledge comes better legislation.
4. It will be an *extreme* error of forward planning if all dangerous dog registries fail to (from the outset) gather key aggression *incident data* at the same time as they gather the dangerous dog details for each case.
5. There are many important reasons why Australia's approach to 'aggressive dog' incident recording should be nationally coordinated to prevent the inevitable system incompatibilities that will otherwise occur.
6. The UAM position is that both dangerous dog *and* dangerous dog incident details can be made most useful/compatible in a national context by the use of a minimum standard process template.