

AMREX - an integrated system for companion animal management

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ABSTRACT

The AMREX (Animal Management Resource EXtension) program currently being developed in Western Australia is a self funding and integrated system for the management of cats and dogs. The aims of the program are: to establish a state 'approved' animal management program that is controlled and administered by professional organisations using only trained and experienced advisers, to co-ordinate and persuade all animal interest groups to work towards a common objective and to clearly define who in the community needs to be educated or re-educated, and to provide them with comprehensive animal management programs that are not primarily government or levy funded. AMREX takes a multi-factorial approach to urban animal management and provides owners with information and training in all aspects of companion animal ownership. It will only be through comprehensive education and training programs, such as AMREX, and a serious effort by those involved with companion animals that the many and varied urban animal management problems will be reduced substantially.

INTRODUCTION

Australia's 3.2 million dogs and 2.8 million domestic cats provide comfort, security and companionship to their owners. They also provide a massive and growing problem for both local authorities, who bear the responsibility for animal management in the community, and veterinarians and animal welfare groups who provide animal care and services.

It is estimated that Australian local authorities receive more than one million complaints each year about dogs barking, wandering, biting, defecating and killing livestock. The number relating to the behaviour of cats is currently much lower, but local authorities will experience an upsurge in this type of complaint once legislation for the control of cats is passed.

Strategies to deal with these problems are many and varied, but the increasing number of complaints suggests most are not working. Often this is because the strategies ignore some of the fundamental principles of urban animal management. There is often no cohesion and co-operation between various organisations, an over reliance on voluntary groups, and no controls on the advice given to companion animal owners. In addition there is usually insufficient government and other financial support to sustain long term educational and training programs.

Any effective urban animal management strategy must include the following:

1. A single state government 'approved' animal management program. This would ensure the continuity and uniformity of education and training, and enable legislation for the re-education of offenders.
2. A mechanism whereby the control of companion animal owner education and training is the responsibility of the state government, but is administered commercially in conjunction with professional organisations to an agreed standard. These organisations must have paid employees who are well trained and accountable. Presently many animal management programs rely heavily on voluntary teaching input, which does not ensure a continuity of standards nor a consistent approach to problem solving.
3. A program that is self funding, paid for by those who use it or by those who benefit from it.
4. All animal interest groups working towards a common objective. If this multi-disciplined approach is taken then there should only be the need for one program. However, too often political agendas, individual egos and petty infighting within and between these groups hinder progressive developments. There must also be a serious effort from the authorities who have a responsibility to enforce legislation to use this option where necessary, so that the benefit of education and training programs can be maximised.

5. The development and implementation of education, training and management programs that will prevent problems from occurring. That is, programs which involve active rather than the passive participation of companion animal owners, and use educators who are adequately trained in the areas on which they advise.
6. A means of identifying who is a responsible companion animal owner and who is not, and what breeding, selling and recycling practices are incompatible with effective animal management. These irresponsible groups and individuals should then be selectively targeted for re-education.

THE AMREX PROGRAM

The AMREX (Animal Management Resource EXtension) Program being developed in Western Australia has the above fundamental principles as its objectives. Launched in January 1994 AMREX is a self funding and integrated system for the management of cats and dogs which, by forging an alliance between veterinarians and local councils, creates a professional basis for the administration of companion animal management.

AMREX has been piloted in Perth by the City of Stirling, with Armadale, Bayswater, Cockburn, Kalamunda, Melville and Nedlands Councils providing facilities, or trialing components of the program to assist with its development. Preliminary trials in Melville and Nedlands Councils over the past one to three years have laid the foundations for AMREX to develop and grow. Within six months of its inception twenty Perth councils have endorsed the program's philosophies and direction, or are currently evaluating them. In addition over sixty Perth veterinary clinics provide ongoing support by promoting AMREX and referring clients into its training courses.

Rod Constantine, Stirling's Executive Manager of Finance and Corporate Services, said 'We found that everybody was trying to do the right thing with respect to responsible dog management, but there was no co-ordination or system of co-operation between the various groups. The AMREX Program facilitates exactly that and also supports the City's long term strategy of combining education of dog owners with enforcement of legislation'.

The aims of AMREX are simple:

- to establish a state 'approved' animal management program that is controlled and administered by organisations such as the Australian Veterinary Association, the RSPCA, and local councils, and which uses only qualified and experienced advisers;
- to co-ordinate and persuade all animal interest groups to work towards a common objective;
- to clearly define who in the community needs to be educated or re-educated, and provide them with comprehensive animal management programs that are not primarily government or levy funded.

1. SETTING UP AN APPROVED PROGRAM

No animal management program can succeed fully without state government endorsement and eventual control. Legislative support is necessary to enable councils to give companion animal owners the choice between education and/or retraining and enforcement action. Presently it is very difficult to re-educate offenders. The courts have limited powers to direct offenders and nowhere to send them, and local authority enforcement officers can be accused of blackmailing people if they offer an education/infringement option, or of receiving 'back handers' if they favour one education program over another.

This situation is clearly unacceptable. If governments are serious about solving their companion animal problems then they must set clear guidelines to enable the development of sufficiently comprehensive programs, and make the necessary legislative changes to enable them to operate effectively. AMREX represents a serious attempt to follow guidelines, pool collective expertise and develop an approved animal management program.

2. CONTROL OF ANIMAL MANAGEMENT AND EDUCATION

Currently advice on the management of companion animals may be obtained from a number of sources. This advice can be of variable quality, and sometimes lacks objectivity, often to the detriment of the owner and/or the animal.

This means:

- there is no means of ensuring that such advice is accurate or relevant;
- there are no controls or accountability placed on those giving advice.

The AMREX Program addresses these two problems in three ways:

(a) Control and administration

Having state government control and responsibility for education, training and animal management, but with its administration by animal interest groups such as local authorities, the RSPCA, and the Australian Veterinary Association. These groups currently employ people or have members who carry out full time animal related duties. They can, therefore, ensure that the information and standards agreed to, as part of an 'approved' animal management program, are maintained by their employees. For example local authorities and veterinarians between them have contact with most companion animal owners, are both financially independent and have expertise in different but complementary areas of urban animal management. AMREX recognises this, and one of the program's preliminary objectives is the creation of a close and workable alliance between these two groups to deal with the treatment of behavioural problems.

Already, as a result of AMREX, two Perth local authorities are recognising the support that veterinarians can offer, and have appointed staff in their local veterinary clinics as dog registration officers.

(b) Employment of advisers

By employing trainers, breeders and other persons with expertise in dog and cat management. In the past many experienced and skilled people have left the animal care industry to seek paid employment elsewhere. AMREX will create employment for these people, and in its first six months of operation seven people have already been employed part or full time in the program.

(c) Ratification of information

Forwarding all information and advice provided to companion animal owners as a part of the program to the MLEOA (Municipal Law Enforcement Officers Association), the RSPCA, the Australian Veterinary Association (WA) and the Department of Local Government for ratification. This ensures that the information is consistent, accurate and compatible with the objectives of these bodies.

3. SELF FINANCING

One of the major attractions of the AMREX Program is that it will be primarily self financing, once developmental costs have been met. An initial injection of sponsorship or developmental funding is required to write and produce the necessary documentation, and to set up the infrastructure to enable the education of companion animal owners.

To date AMREX has progressed without state or local authority funding. A research grant from Pet Care Information and Advisory Service and sponsorship from Westralian Drug Holdings Ltd has provided the initial capital for the program. Currently the primary source of income is from companion animal owners who pay for dog training and/or individual consultations. This self generating income ensures the financial viability of the AMREX Program.

Over 90 percent of companion animal owners are referred into the training courses by their veterinarian, and this in itself demonstrates that no self financing program can succeed without veterinary involvement. People usually act on veterinary advice, and also expect to pay a fee for services provided or recommended by their veterinarian. Conversely owners expect similar services to be available at no cost, or for a minimal fee, when provided by councils and/or welfare groups.

It seems unfortunate that when there are such readily available alternative sources of funding, many involved in animal management advocate a levy on all cat and dog owners to pay for education and/or subsidised sterilisation. A levy will include all those who do not offend, nor have the need to be educated, and forces them to pay for the education of those who need it but do not pay for it. Again the responsible minority are being asked to subsidise services for the irresponsible. Providing much needed services at a realistic cost on a user pays basis is far more equitable and cost effective, but is an option which is being ignored by most local and state governments.

The argument commonly raised that most companion animal owners cannot afford to pay the fee for services provided in the AMREX Program is nonsense. Genuine cases of hardship are a minority, and because a few do occur there no reason to reject such a system. Most companion animal owners who fail to address a problem with their animal do so for one or more of five reasons:

- a. they do not want to;
- b. they want to but cannot find the time to do what is required;
- c. they want to and can afford to, but do not want to spend the money;
- d. they do not know how to, and there is nobody to help them;
- e. they cannot afford to.

Category (d) represents the responsible owners who may appear irresponsible because of their pet's behaviour. Category (e) is a small minority. Categories (a), (b) & (c) need persuasion, and the AMREX Program offers these groups the opportunity to become responsible companion animal owners. Although many will choose to dispose of their pets or relocate them rather than address the problem of concern, once AMREX is fully developed and readily available there will be an expectation in the community that companion animal owners with problems must take action to correct them.

It is quite possible that the deeply entrenched category (c) attitude has arisen as a result of the many free or subsidised assistance driven programs so prevalent in animal management today. These include subsidised registrations and sterilisations, a minimal cost for training, free disposal, and/or the failure of many local authorities to enforce the legislation they are gazetted to uphold. These have all contributed to an expectation in many companion animal owners that they should pay little or nothing for education, training and the behavioural modification of their pet, or receive no fines or compensation claims if their animal offends. This 'freebie' approach to urban animal management requires a continual and substantial injection of public money and/or the goodwill of volunteers, without seriously addressing the main problems that the community has with companion animals: the same community that is expected to pay for such schemes.

Fortunately there are alternatives to subsidised assistance driven schemes. Many dog and cat owners seek assistance voluntarily when they have a problem with their pet's behaviour, health or welfare, or recognise the need to prevent a problem from occurring. Others however require an incentive for participation in education programs, or a disincentive not to. Discounted registration fees and subsidies have been the traditional lure, but these are often an administrative burden to local authorities, and are usually given for actions that have no relevance to the main concerns of councils. In the AMREX Program a certificate of completion is awarded upon any course being completed, and in the near future this will be able to be presented for discounts on products or services from local businesses. In addition, offenders may have the option of re-education or a fine. Both systems are more flexible, simple to administer and cost less than subsidised assistance driven schemes.

4. A CO-OPERATIVE APPROACH

AMREX has the support in principle of the Australian Veterinary Association (WA), the Municipal Law Enforcement Officers Association, the RSPCA (WA), the Department of Local Government, the Canine Association of WA, and Pet Care Information and Advisory Service. From its inception the program has sought the co-operation of various animal interest groups and endeavoured to find common objectives within and between these groups to enable them to work together. This is essential if a multi-disciplined approach to urban animal management is to be taken.

Without this co-operation it is not possible to implement a program that:

- a. prevents urban animal management problems;
- b. addresses complaint management;
- c. treats behavioural problems;
- d. gains community and media support;
- e. has effects through long term public education to bring about a fundamental shift in public attitudes.

THE MANY FACETS OF AMREX

Each component of the AMREX Program includes comprehensive measures aimed at dealing with different aspects of a particular problem. As a consequence all animal interest groups are affected by, or are involved with, this approach. For example, measures to reduce the number of people being chased, threatened or bitten by dogs would include the following:

- a bite avoidance module for children interacting with dogs in the home, and in public;
- a module for service employees when entering private property;
- a module for enforcement personnel, veterinary nurses, and trainers when handling aggressive dogs, and for identifying potential biters;
- a module for parents to prevent dog bites in the home;
- a re-education/training program for dog owners with dogs that are aggressive;
- information for breeders, animal shelters and pet shops on preventing problems from occurring;
- assessment of dogs for recycling;
- treatment strategies for dogs that bite;
- legislating for dogs that bite.

5. COMPANION ANIMAL OWNER EDUCATION

'Pet owners must be educated' or 'education is the answer' are the catch cries of many people involved in urban animal management today. This is mere rhetoric, for the same people have failed to deliver the means by which companion animal owners can actively participate in education programs so they can be educated or re-educated.

There are three reasons why such programs have not eventuated, despite the promises to provide them. There is indecision over:

- a. what information is needed;
- b. who is primarily responsible for education;
- c. who pays for it.

AMREX attempts to overcome these problems of indecision by providing for the active participation of companion animal owners in a comprehensive user pays education and training program. In addition there is a secondary emphasis on passive education, such as the distribution of leaflets or the use of the print and electronic media.

Education of owners

These components of AMREX provide assistance to companion animal owners in all aspects of pet ownership: health, welfare, behaviour, training and legal responsibilities. Several examples of these are outlined in Part Two.

Train the 'adviser'

A considerable focus of the AMREX Program is training people to be educators. Without adequately trained advisers it is extremely difficult to educate any animal or its owner, or prevent potential problems from occurring.

AMREX will provide many avenues of training to assist members of animal interest groups and individuals to advise companion animal owners. These include components for:

- veterinary nurses in field interview techniques, legal responsibilities of companion animal owners, and early detection of behavioural problems;
- local authority and welfare enforcement officers in investigative techniques, enforcement psychology, animal handling, and assessment of companion animals for referral or treatment.

Veterinary nurse training will be carried out after consultation with the Australian Veterinary Association (WA) and the Veterinary Nurses Association (WA), and for enforcement personnel after consultation with the Municipal Law Enforcement Officers Association.

AMREX advisers

As a prerequisite for any other person employed in the AMREX Program, formal training in feline and canine behaviour, animal care and pet law is required. To provide this opportunity, a Certificate of Urban Animal Management has been set up at Bentley TAFE (Perth). This is a part-time course of approximately 100 hours of lectures, tutorials and examinations in Pet Law, Animal Nursing, Canine and/or Feline Behaviour, and Public Relations/Communication.

This certificate is aimed at people with experience, or with an interest in animals, who wish to seek formal qualifications with a view to employment in any 'approved' training and education program.

In addition a Dog Trainers Certificate will be developed to ensure a minimum standard of instruction. Currently dog trainers are not required to hold any formal qualifications to demonstrate they have the necessary skills and experience to train a dog. The requirements of the certificate will be set after consultation with representatives from the Canine Association of WA, dog obedience clubs and private instructors.

6. RESPONSIBLE COMPANION ANIMAL OWNERSHIP/PRACTICES

(a) Companion animal owners

'Irresponsible owners' is a vague and meaningless term, as there is no clear definition provided with the phrase as to who is an irresponsible companion animal owner. As a result it is very difficult for authorities to decide which owners to target, and for what reasons.

Under the AMREX Program 'responsible companion animal ownership' equates to:

- Providing for the companion animal's health and welfare, managing its behaviour and exercising control over it at all times;

so that:

- The Animal + Owner + Society all benefit, or are not adversely affected by the relationship.

Clearly, by this definition there are considerably fewer responsible owners than present estimates would have the community believe. Fortunately many more owners would be responsible if the community required them to be, or if they knew what guidelines to follow, and how to do so.

Companion animal owners can be divided into four categories:

- a. irresponsible (careless and uninformed owners);
- b. careless (informed but careless owners);
- c. uninformed (careful but uninformed owners);
- d. responsible (careful and informed owners).

A minority of owners represent (a) & (d). Those in (b) & (c) fall into two categories: those who would like to be responsible, but cannot because of their inability or lack of willingness to manage their animal's behaviour, and those who have no intention of changing.

The AMREX Program would provide the opportunity for many companion animal owners in categories (b) & (c) to enter category (d) by assisting them to rectify the problem of concern.

It would then be the responsibility of local authorities to ensure that those who choose not to become responsible, once the opportunity exists to become so, are dealt with adequately and appropriately. Without this support it would be very difficult for a program such as AMREX to function effectively.

(b) The responsibility of animal interest groups

To assist with the many and varied problems associated with companion animals, all animal interest groups must maintain professional standards of practice and service. Without a minimum professional standard set by these groups, which can be used as an example, the community will have difficulty accepting selective sanctions against backyard breeders, dogs recycled from private homes, unprofessional trainers or proposals such as compulsory sterilisation.

One area where professional standards are often deficient is the widespread use of management practices that may later cause behavioural problems. This is often overlooked by many when attempting to solve urban animal management problems. As a part of its total approach to urban animal management, AMREX identifies these practices and actively promotes community awareness of them. Questionable companion animal breeding and management practices include:

Breeders: potential and actual behavioural problems in companion animals resulting from individuals breeding to a physical and not a behavioural standard, failing to sterilise surplus breeding stock, selling of aged, poorly socialised kennelled dogs and bitches, selling pups and kittens less than seven weeks of age and greater than ten weeks, and failing to provide advice on basic behavioural management to the new owner.

Animal shelters and pounds: many dogs recycled by animal shelters and/or pounds are not adequately assessed for potential and actual behavioural problems, and subsequently make unsuitable pets. This type of recycling is usually done by well meaning people who feel sorry for the dog that has been abandoned or neglected, or by busy councils responding to the demands of people wanting to buy animals. The long term effects on animals of early trauma, major upheavals and multiple homes are often not considered, particularly in relation to the development of later behavioural problems.

Pet shops: many behavioural problems can be wholly or partly attributed to a dog or kitten's experiences in its first 3-12 weeks of life. Management practices found in many pet shops, such as the early removal of an animal from its mother and/or litter mates, the trauma associated with transportation and successive homes, the sale of animals at under seven weeks and over ten weeks of age, and inadequate or inaccurate advice may contribute to these later problems.

Through its 'buyer beware' module AMREX will assist many unsuspecting prospective owners to avoid some of the 'hidden dangers' when selecting a pet.

Dog obedience clubs: whilst many dog training clubs endeavour to maintain a high standard of instruction, this is not always possible because of an increasing demand for their services and their reliance on volunteers to carry out the instruction. Classes are often large, and many instructors are too inexperienced or, at worst, completely untrained in animal behaviour to deal with the many and varied problems people have with their dogs. The result is often inadequate, inaccurate or inappropriate advice, and a short and dissatisfied stay at the club by the dog and its handler.

AMREX attempts to overcome this by requiring its advisers to complete a Certificate of Urban Animal Management, a Certificate of Competence in Dog Training, and to only give out advice that has been ratified by local authorities, veterinarians and animal behaviourists.

PART TWO - KEY COMPONENTS OF AMREX

Education/Training centres

An Animal Management Office will be established to co-ordinate the activities of satellite centres in each local authority of metropolitan Perth. The satellite centres will provide information and advice to pet owners, and will be focal points for education, training and local issues relating to animals. The training and education programs will be administered by the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA), in conjunction with local councils who will provide the facilities.

Cat and dog owner education

A three lecture course for cat and dog owners will rotate between the satellite centres. Each course will include information on aspects of the companion animal's health, welfare, behaviour and training, and the owner's legal responsibilities. Cat and dog owners will pay a fee to attend the relevant course, with local veterinarians and animal control and welfare officers paid to give the lectures.

Offenders programs

In addition to the above courses, more detailed lectures, discussion groups and assessments of problem behaviours can be carried out at the centres.

Dog obedience program

The primary source of funding for the AMREX Program is dog training courses. These are currently held at ten venues set up in eight local authorities across metropolitan Perth. Referrals into the courses for basic dog training are from veterinarians and/or the local councils, with the venues provided by the council usually at no cost, or for a nominal fee.

Courses are for a fixed duration, have a small number of dogs in the classes and are commenced approximately every three weeks at each venue. Only experienced trainers who are enrolled in the Certificate of Urban Animal Management course are employed as instructors. The classes are accessible and affordable to most dog owners, and the set format ensures a uniformity of standards. By directing companion animal owners to training and by providing the facilities, local councils are seen to be taking a more proactive approach to solving companion animal related problems in the community.

Dog exercise park

Several centres may in the future incorporate a dog activity area, with permanent agility equipment and other recreational activities for use by dog owners. AMREX contains a number of modules for financing and building an affordable exercise reserve, for maximising the use of existing dog exercise areas, and for dealing with the problems associated with dogs defaecating in public places.

Cat management

AMREX recognises the need for legislative support for education and training programs, and sets out to fully integrate these two aspects of animal management. In the past many dog management programs have failed to achieve objectives because one aspect does not facilitate or complement the other. It is desirable that the same mistakes encountered in controlling dogs would not be made when addressing the problems associated with domestic cats. This unfortunately appears not to be the case.

After several years of cat committee meetings, workshops and conferences costing many thousands of dollars, the draft documentation produced in most states consists of a few pages outlining legislative options and a brief mention of vague educational proposals. Such strategies will not address the consequences of the implementation of legislation to control cats. Cat nuisance complaints will increase substantially as soon as the legislation is passed, and unless local authorities have the resources and strategies to deal with them, they will have many more problems, and different ones to those at present.

The infrastructure being developed within the AMREX Program will serve the needs of cat owners, and assist local authorities with many of the complaints they will receive about the behaviour of cats. Modules to assist owners with the training and management of their cats, and the prevention and treatment of behavioural problems are included in AMREX, along with measures to assist cat owners with the constraints and demands of legislation.

Treatment of behavioural problems

Many cats and dogs have behavioural problems that can be successfully treated, but often such animals are euthanased because owners fail to seek assistance, or are inappropriately advised. It is estimated by a number of sources that between 40 percent and 60 percent of dogs euthanased are euthanased because of a behavioural problem, and this is a major reason for the average life span of a dog being less than three years.

A key strategy of AMREX is to utilise the expertise of veterinarians and their staff in the treatment of behavioural problems. This may occur after referral from a local authority, an animal interest group, or when dog and/or cat owners seek assistance themselves.

One of several systems in AMREX is for local authority enforcement officers to be provided with information and training to assist them in resolving companion animal behavioural problems. If the problem does not abate, or the council has insufficient time to provide ongoing support, then the cat or dog owner will be given a list of local veterinarians and/or accredited non veterinarians who are qualified to further assist them.

One Perth council has now officially sanctioned the practice of only referring offenders to veterinarians or accredited non veterinarians approved by the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA). This is a recognition of the key role that veterinarians can have in urban animal management, and is a step forward in ensuring that there is uniformity of advice, and that it is appropriate for the problem. A fee is charged by the clinic for this service and for any treatment program prescribed by the veterinarian. A series of modules is being developed in AMREX so that behavioural consultations can be carried out cost effectively by the clinic, and at a fee affordable to the client. Should the owner elect not to take this option, the council can then decide upon an alternative course of action such as a fine, or the seizure of the animal.

An additional role of veterinarians and their staff will be in the early identification of potential and actual problem behaviours. This will enable early treatment to be given before a serious problem develops, and sets in place a mechanism to prevent many of the problems that local authorities would have had to deal with at a later date.

School programs

AMREX fully supports and complements the stated objectives of the 'Pep Pet' Primary Schools Education Program, but with 'Pep Pet' being currently implemented in primary schools throughout Australia, the direct education of children of this age group is not an immediate priority of the AMREX Program. However with the development of many contact points and the practical application of the program, AMREX will have a considerable impact on the attitudes and actions of children towards animals. As part of the 'Deputy Rex' module each child will be given a community responsibility to ensure that companion animals are trained and looked after correctly by their owners.

Getting the community involved

This component of AMREX provides the framework for community involvement and participation. It sets out a series of guidelines for the development and implementation of community based activities which promote effective urban animal management, and provides the promotional materials for these.

Gaining media support

AMREX provides factual and topical material for local authorities and other animal interest groups to run an ongoing media campaign, which will assist in responsible reporting by the media of companion animal issues.

Resources kit

AMREX includes a comprehensive resources kit for each of the groups involved. For local authorities this includes:

- an audio visual support kit;
- a package of giveaways;
- a resource package containing artwork for the AMREX modules, such as sample drawings for use in promotional material and advertising;
- a range of sample letters for raising local sponsorship and/or community support for specific activities;
- sample speech formats and lecture notes.

The resource kits for veterinarians and advisers in the AMREX Program contain information and material applicable to their roles.

Breeding, selling and development of companion animals

AMREX also addresses key animal management issues such as the breeding, sterilisation, identification, registration and exchanging of companion animals.

AMREX contains a number of modules to assist new companion animal owners. These include:

- an AMREX breeders/sellers kit to be given or sold to new owners;
- a 'buyer beware' module to assist prospective pet owners in selecting an appropriate pet;
- a puppy/kitten module to assist owners with the behavioural management and development of their companion animal. This may involve individual or group tuition, or advice from their veterinarian.

Managing population numbers

Incorporated into AMREX is an extensive and creative module to discourage the indiscriminate breeding of dogs and cats, and promote the breeding and supply of animals that are suitable as pets in the family home.

The AMREX Program actively supports sterilisation as one animal management strategy, but unlike many groups and individuals it does not promote sterilisation as the only approach to urban animal management. Inherent in the success of AMREX is its user pays philosophy, and as a result it does not support the spending of time and money assisting a minority of owners to sterilise their animals, or providing services at no cost to those who wish to dispose of unwanted pets. Neither of these approaches has been shown to be very effective in reducing population numbers or solving problems, and their continuation needs to be seriously evaluated.

Alternative strategies include:

- cost effective options to encourage sterilisation. These may involve a partial refund of an annual licence fee directly to the veterinarian when a registered dog is sterilised;
- the providing of factual information on the physical, behavioural and ecological advantages of sterilisation;
- the promoting of a realistic fee for service for the disposal of animals that are surrendered or caught in traps set by local authorities or welfare groups.

Shelter and pound management

AMREX supports the professional management of pounds and shelters. There are many examples where such occurs throughout Australia. However, others fail to satisfy even the basic requirements of shelter and pound management. To overcome many of the problems inherent in such cases, clear guidelines for acceptable standards of management need to be established, and those that do not conform to these standards should not be permitted to operate. The role of an animal management system such as AMREX is to consult with professionally managed shelters such as the 'Lost Dogs Home' in Melbourne, or shelters run by the RSPCA and the Animal Welfare League, and integrate aspects of the program that can support or enhance their current activities.

It is extremely important that dogs recycled from shelters and pounds are properly assessed so that the placement of actual or potentially problem dogs and cats is avoided. Many shelters and pounds that continue to recycle animals with scant regard to the animal's behaviour fail to realise that the placement of such animals without assessment might leave them at risk of litigation from dissatisfied or injured owners.

As part of the shelter management module AMREX includes:

- a program for the behavioural assessment of dogs and cats prior to their recycling from animal shelters and council pounds.

Identification and registration

A means of registration and/or identification has to be an integral part of any animal management system so that the animal to be controlled can be traced and/or its owner identified. The issue of whether a fee is payable or not, or whether both registration and identification are necessary and who should administer the requirements is secondary to this.

As dogs are currently required by legislation to be registered and must carry identification when in public, the AMREX Program includes a number of strategies to encourage the registration and identification of dogs, strategies which would be equally applicable if cats were subject to the same legislative constraints.

These include:

- using veterinary clinics as dog or cat registration agencies or as locations where information and forms can be distributed on behalf of the local authority;
- introducing practical and positive incentives for owning a registered and permanently identified companion animal;
- promoting the advantages of identification to the owner and their companion animal;
- promoting state wide usage of the microchip, once there is national endorsement of a single system.

Animal health and welfare

Animal health and welfare is an integral part of AMREX, and the infrastructure set up within the program will enable information and advice on these important areas of animal care to reach many companion animal owners. Through consultation with the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA), and welfare organisations such as the RSPCA, and by using veterinarians and welfare officers as advisers, AMREX will ensure that information provided in the program is both accurate and relevant.

Ethnic/Cultural differences

Many perceptions about companion animals are affected by different cultural background of various ethnic groups and/or their understanding of the application of animal control and welfare legislation. AMREX will make a serious attempt to address the perceptions of special interest groups, and where areas of incompatibility with current legislation and cultural values may occur.

CONCLUSION

The AMREX program is different to current animal management programs, in that it attempts to introduce a single, comprehensive and self financing animal management system to a large metropolitan city. Few individual components of AMREX are unusual or even innovative, but it is in the collation, integration and control of these components that AMREX is unique.

The aims of AMREX are simple:

- to establish a state 'approved' animal management system, controlled and administered by organisations such as the Australian Veterinary Association, the RSPCA, and local councils, using qualified and experienced advisers;
- to co-ordinate and persuade all animal interest groups to work towards a common objective;
- to clearly define who in the community needs to be educated or re-educated, and provide them with comprehensive management programs that are not primarily government or levy funded.

AMREX will be introduced in a series of stages over the next five years. Stage One simply involves setting up a solid funding base, and building the infrastructure to support the program. AMREX makes no extravagant claims, nor even suggests its individual components are always better than what is presently available. Programs have to be developed, trialled, modified and re-trialled before they can claim to address their objectives. In this regard AMREX is evolving and changing, but is clearly focussed on achieving the stated aims.

The AMREX Program does not claim to eliminate all problem behaviour, nor solve every problem, as not all owners are willing or able to carry out a treatment program, nor is it possible to change the behaviour of every animal. In its initial stages AMREX cannot be expected to solve the problems associated with repeat offenders or the 'hard case' scenario, because it first targets those who can or want to change their own behaviour or that of their companion animal.

It does however aim to substantially reduce the time spent, particularly by local authorities, in investigating and processing complaints, and assist them to resolve problems in a way which utilises the expertise available in the community, and shows the council to be fair and reasonable to all parties concerned.

AMREX is not a loose aggregation of single components: all are integrated and interdependent. It is the totality of the approach, rather than the application of one or two modules that will succeed in changing community attitudes and reduce the frequency and severity of problems associated with companion animals. AMREX will be successful only if it is implemented in its entirety, and when all of those associated with companion animals recognise that it is now time for a serious effort to be made in urban animal management.

AMREX is in its infancy, but it demonstrates that a workable urban animal management program does not require unlimited local and state government funding. It is a program which has been developed privately, utilises professional expertise, and co-ordinates the provision of essential services for the control, prevention and treatment of urban animal management problems in the community.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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During the 1970's I fostered a growing interest in animal behaviour by studying psychology and zoology at Waikato University in Hamilton, New Zealand. With the Behaviour Unit at Ruakura Research Centre nearby I gained valuable research experience in the behaviour and welfare of domestic and companion animals. A research assignment to study the behavioural ecology of wandering dogs led to my interest in urban animal management issues.

Doctoral studies of dog attacks on livestock at Murdoch University in Perth enabled me to research, develop and trial a number of strategies to reduce urban animal management problems. Whilst the research is finally nearing completion after many diversions, a direct result has been the development of the AMREX (Animal Management Resource EXtension) Program. Although working privately as an Animal Behaviour and Management Consultant in Perth, the growth of AMREX is such that the program is now becoming a full time commitment.

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