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Aspects relating to pets, people and Indigenous communities and how to work together for a sustainable way forward

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Animal management in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is not just a remote issue. Seventy-six per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples live in non-remote areas, predominately along the Eastern Seaboard. Although there are a wide variety of situations, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities anywhere across Australia seem to face similar problems. Organisations and groups such as AMRRIC, RSPCA NSW and other service providers are well placed to learn from each other in meaningful ways to work alongside remote and urban Aboriginal and Torres Strait communities to deal with these, often complex, issues.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples often suffer a sense of isolation from the people they interact with in remote or urbanised areas and often have a lack of access to services in remote areas. This can also be an issue in urban areas where people may be or feel economically or socially excluded, e.g. when people are 'shame jobbed' or embarrassed inadvertently or purposefully about the condition of their pets. A lack of resourcing for dog health/desexing programs and a lack of or insufficient Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment both on the ground and in managerial positions is common. Lack of community engagement and empowerment due to lack of appropriate community consultation with regards to by laws etc often results in 'white fella' top down law that is often difficult to comprehend, irrelevant or impossible to enforce.

Understanding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's different perspectives on family responsibilities and roles of dogs is crucial to delivering culturally sensitive programs in remote, rural and urban areas. Therefore collaboration with relevant support groups and appropriate information sharing to enable preparation for vet visits and dog health programs is also crucial. When delivering the program messages, the use of appropriate terminology and methodology becomes crucial. People need to receive messages delivered in a relevant and culturally appropriate manner such as posters etc that are not too text dominant with relevant pictures, otherwise immediate barriers can be formed. It is important program staff do not speak about removing peoples' 'neglected animals' and finding them 'new homes' to avoid creating potentially painful parallels with the stolen generations story.

Redressing these issues for pets, people and communities will provide a partnered and sustainable solution for our future. AMRRIC and RSPCANSW will endeavour to illustrate the above with achievements in terms of demonstrable and sustainable community benefit outcomes that are tangibly useful to Local Government.

Background

Seventy-six per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples live in non-remote areas, predominately along the Eastern Seaboard of Australia. Problems with animal management, animal welfare and how to work alongside Aboriginal and Torres St peoples to improve these issues is challenging for remote areas as well as the urban areas. Opinions about pet ownership, treatment of dogs that don't appear to be owned, perceptions about people and their relationships to pets vary from community to community, state to state, individual to individual. Commonalities apply however there have been keys steps identified, through experience, that ensure positive ways forward.

Cultural significance and traditional law relating to animals in communities cannot be overlooked when considering compliance, partnership and appropriateness of any animal health, welfare and control plans being developed with the community (Hardaker 2008). Recognition and acceptance of these facts help facilitate the establishment of sustainable culturally appropriate animal health and welfare delivered alongside education programs.

Respecting the cultural traditions of individual Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and the right of the community to manage their animals and animal programs is imperative to undertaking any work in improving health and welfare outcomes. Dogs, in particular, remain

integral to the fabric of communities: their health is intrinsically linked to the health and overall well-being of the community. Therefore, a wholistic, 'one health' approach is required to achieve change in improvements in the health and control of animals.

In any Aboriginal community, remote or urban, companion animal welfare and control can be viewed as either a "top-down" approach i.e. where decisions are made by extra-community employees and imposed on communities or a "bottom up" approach where the community's needs and concerns underpin the animal management strategy. Given the enormous and ongoing cost of the top-down approach many communities worldwide are looking for more sustainable and effective practices (AMRRIC 2006) as past approaches have often been non-progressive and disrespectful on the whole.

A bottom-up approach is especially important where differing cultural values exist. Whilst it is clear that, like most people, many Aboriginal people love and value their dogs and often share their distress about dogs in poor condition, not all people necessarily share western cultural attitudes to animal welfare and individual responsibility to care for their animals What can seem cruel to an Indigenous person can seem normal to a western person and vice versa. Two examples: Very often we hear 'let him die natural way' in response to an old diseased dog that a western eye might think would be kinder to euthanase. This is a challenging situation for any non-indigenous person working in a community (Donelan 2006). Cultural attitudes and beliefs may underlie this attitude. This wish must be considered should the Veterinarian or Animal Management Worker/Officer wish to continue building a trusting relationship that allows further work to be undertaken to improve animal welfare in that community. A palliative approach might gain more cooperation in the first instance, allowing a relationship to be built in which discussion of euthanasia can take place. Another example from the other perspective is keeping dogs locked alone in backyards: to some people this is incredibly cruel, whereas it is the norm in most urbanised areas (Donelan 2006).

In Aboriginal communities in particular, animal health, welfare and control tactics dictated by external forces using non-negotiated methodologies have been uniformly unsuccessful and unsustainable. Imposition of welfare and control measures, in the absence of trust, relationship, adequate capacity building and two-way education and awareness programs has resulted in unnecessary ongoing expenditure on pure service delivery, both veterinary and law enforcement, and has also been demonstrated to be a completely unsustainable model. Understanding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's different perspectives on family responsibilities and roles of dogs is crucial to delivering culturally sensitive programs in remote, rural and urban areas.

Perspectives on companion animals

Some differences in perspectives on normal mores for dogs in communities may have originated from the different traditions of living with canines in either culture. In contrast to the Euro-Australian tradition, Indigenous Australian societies traditionally lived with dingoes brought in as pups from the wild (Corbett 2001). Dingoes are self-reliant, hunted for their food and often contributed their hunt to their companion Aboriginal family. They needed to be free roaming to fulfill this role. Domestic dogs, on the other hand, are almost completely dependent on human carers for food and water (Boitani et al 1995). Also, dingo breeding only occurred in the wild, and at much reduced rate compared to our domestic dogs that are capable of replacing 70% of their numbers every year (Matter and Daniels 2000). Despite these differences, canine companions had, and do still have, important roles as companions and protectors (Hunt 2006).

It is not only the breed of dogs that have changed. The wider social context must be considered. European settlement brought displacement from homelands and economies, and institutionalization further led to a chronic disempowerment of people. Roaming dogs, together with this disempowerment has underpinned a common perception/ misconception that some Aboriginal people do not care about their dogs, whereas in fact, on the whole, they do. Dr Sophie Constable's research confirms this fact (Constable et al 2008) demonstrating that Aboriginal people keep pets for many of the same reasons as non-Indigenous people. Companionship is the key reason for people to keep dogs, cats or pigs and interactions between them and their owners are often affectionate or sometimes cruel as in any developed society. Whilst dogs everywhere can be part of human families, in some Indigenous communities this is recognized in a formal way by including dogs in the kinship system. Dogs can also serve a practical purpose by assisting in hunting (Donelan 2006) and are often seen as 'protectors and guardians, both of property in a territorial sense but also in a spiritual sense: to ward off evil spirits.

"Dog Dreaming" is a very real and an important feature of dog ownership and treatment within many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. To overlook or dismiss this issue at a community level is firstly disrespectful and ignorant and secondly, can result in significant noncompliance with by laws or imposed plans in many communities.

Commonly shared issues – remote and urban

In remote communities common problems relate to animal welfare and public nuisance. They include overpopulation from uncontrolled dog breeding; visibly diseased, malnourished animals (mainly dogs); public health considerations related to external and internal parasites; noise and nuisance from fighting and pack behaviour; spreading of rubbish while scavenging for food and public safety concerns with dog bite injuries from aggressive animals (Donelan 2006). Unrestrained breeding of larger breed e.g. pig dogs negatively influences the makeup of the next generation of pups in many top end communities (AMRRIC 2007).

Many people are often overwhelmed by free breeding dogs and cats and have little access to desexing programs and population control. They feel disempowered by non-Aboriginal decision makers and struggle to access resources such as normal veterinary services, medications, information or education to improve the situation resulting in the overall poor state of animal health and welfare. It is positive to note some change in recent years regarding these services.

Aboriginal people commonly share their concerns that health status of their dogs (in particular) impact on human health and welfare. Zoonotic diseases and mental health and wellbeing concerns such as embarrassment or 'shame' about the state of their companion animals' health are often heard. They express fear of attacks from free roaming dogs to themselves and other dogs.

Although there are a wide variety of situations, AMRRIC after many years of working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across Australia observe similar problems across the country. It appears that longstanding animal health and welfare management issues exist in many of those communities with varying degrees of veterinary programs, resources, education or professional support to address the situation. Whilst some communities seem to be way ahead in terms of achieving locally owned and driven success in this area, we have seen few models of truly sustainable change. AMRRIC is currently attempting to build a sustainable model in the NT that is being rolled out in partnership with three shires.

Developing trustful relationships is the key

"Some of the greatest challenges in providing veterinary services to remote communities centre on lack of understanding and trust. Education and developing a trusting relationship with community members is the key to success, but often there are barriers, [including] language and cultural', (Kennedy cited in Constable and Lucia 2011) especially when local people aren't involved. The lack of trust can mostly be attributed to a history of often brutal forms of companion animal management with routine poisoning, shooting forming the mainstay of companion animal control. In more recent times lack of trust is deepened or reinforced when unknown contractors are bought in to communities by non-Aboriginal authorities to undertake mass non- consensual euthanasia programs as a reactive response to the death or mauling of someone.

The Veterinarian, the Animal Control Officer or Rangers are often the frontline people involved in delivering a dog health and welfare strategy in an Aboriginal community. They are often faced with a culturally complex environment and a background of fraught cross-cultural interaction. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Traditional Owners or Dog Dreaming Elders possess authority or custodianship over dog matters within existing systems of traditional governance. For lasting and beneficial companion animal control change to occur it is essential that those with authority to speak contribute to planning a control program. Identifying those key people and *'working with them rather than for them'* (Phelan 2006) is vital.

Programs require significant planning with local staff, traditional owner groups and key stakeholders that support animal control and regulation. A QLD Health Environmental Health Worker stated recently 'It is important for agencies and other people who visit these communities to understand the environment these services are provided in and the experience required to provide animal management services in discreet communities'. Programs are best approached in this way, and ideally with a locally employed animal management worker or similar person, who has the communities trust, speaks the local language and has the relationships.

Unless people have a trustful relationship with the veterinarian or the animal management staff in a community they are not likely to engage in the program, pick up the phone or ask for assistance. This can also be an issue in urban areas where people may be or feel economically or socially excluded, e.g. when people are 'shame jobbed' or embarrassed inadvertently or purposefully about the condition of their pets.

Acting with integrity to build respect and trust with community stakeholders and community engagement in the program is a must to improving the welfare of animals (Donelan 2006). In a climate of mistrust, resulting from inappropriate culling programs or treatments and surgical procedures undertaken without owner permission, nothing can be achieved. Everything we do relies on the process of relationship building and respect.

Educating or 'two way knowledge sharing'

Education or 'two way knowledge sharing' is a critical component of companion animal health, welfare and control bridging knowledge gaps from both European and Indigenous cultures. All levels of government are beginning to realize the huge value in this vital program component although is still tends to fall down the list in terms of budgetary priorities. There is currently a lack of trained Aboriginal staff in the NT who can deliver the programs and a paucity of resources on the whole, especially for remote communities. AMRRIC is redressing this through the employment and training of up to 18 Animal Management Worker's over the next few years. Through education and advocacy, appropriate resourcing and two-way knowledge transfer we are able to create the resources the community requires to establish a plan to achieve animal health and welfare standards that everyone can be proud of.

For the majority of Aboriginal people in remote communities English is their third or fourth language and English literacy rates are poor (Donelan 2006). We must bear this in mind when communicating messages from our world perspective. An imposed western world view, as so often seen, becomes the single most important factor in accounting for communication breakdown (Australian Volunteers International 2004). Communities must be empowered with knowledge, through community engagement and consultation to understand by laws, animal health and welfare messages etc. through appropriate messaging, images, and language if change is to come about. Animal management workers or local rangers are the expert communicators in delivering the right messages (Constable et al 2010).

Through community engagement and consultation, correct language and the messages to be conveyed can be checked, or better yet, developed as tailor made resources for their community. External visitors or workers may speak about removing people's 'neglected animals' and finding them 'new and better homes' which can create painful parallels with the stolen generations story, demonstrating the importance of 'right' language and understanding the environment they are in.

It has been demonstrated that trained animal management workers are best placed to raise awareness and improvements of dog health issues through locally delivered education strategies. Verbal 'yarning' is demonstrated to be the preferred method of knowledge sharing for 68.4% of those interviewed by Constable et al 2010, and 79% of the people preferred locally produced education resources over commercial resources that had no real meaning for them (Constable et al 2010). However, every community differs in their preferred way of sharing knowledge: some prefer passive pictorial resources and others preferred active participative dog health demonstration days or watching an educational video. Clearly people need to receive messages delivered in a relevant and culturally appropriate manner, to best encourage communication and to avoid forming barriers through misunderstandings. Prendergast's (Prendergast et al. 2008) research demonstrated that family members play a key role in shaping dog ownership behaviors and decisions concerning participating in education and dog health and desexing programs. A recent evaluation of the AMRRIC's DVD, 'Caring for Dogs, Community and Country', undertaken by an independent consultant, showed that learning about caring for dogs occurred through organised and structured activities (active learning) and through more informal mechanisms, such as the DVD playing in the background in waiting rooms (passive learning). Engaging families in this type of learning was demonstrated as essential to attaining desired behavioural changes (Holmes 2012).

Further, developing an understanding of relevant legislative requirements through targeted education and training programs will enhance the capacity of communities to benefit from the implementation of programs. Enabling communities to understand the process fosters effective and appropriate long term change and compliance. Likewise, enabling service providers and other stakeholders to understand better the environment they are working in allows them to appreciate the kinds of barriers that impede immediate term change in essential areas of animal welfare and management.

Giving it time – 'slow and steady'

Government funding is generally tied to Key Performance Indicators (KPI's). For service providers who are funded dependent on the achievement of set KPI's, challenges arise when remote communities do not function on this western view basis. Given the range of cultural and sociological attitudes toward pets, the difference in world view, significant imposed government policies constantly reshaping community living and a range of other external influences on community, pets are often way down the scale of importance when it comes to coping with this high level of change. Pets and program outcomes don't often meet the KPI's organisations need to report on. Programs may take enormous amounts of time which can seem frustrating to local government and service providers. It has been demonstrated to AMRRIC, program after program, that 'slow and steady wins the race'. There are no 'quick fix solutions' despite millions of dollars that have been spent in the past trying to achieve one.

There must be compromise, trust and respect. Slow and steady attitudinal change, underpinned by trust, respect and adequate resources, has been the way forward in many communities where AMRRIC and the RSPCA are working.

Consultation, local employment, knowledge and language

Consulting extensively within the community to facilitate the development of a strategic animal health and management plan guided by community needs and circumstances is crucial. Imposing pre-determined programs, developed through non-Aboriginal eyes can mean little to no sustained compliance with the approaches undertaken. Without extensive consultation the vet or provider may arrive in the community to undertake the pre-decided program to find that the community, in fear of what is being imposed based on previous history, have evacuated their dogs to a 'safer' place.

Environmental Health Workers (EHWs), and Animal Management Workers (AMW's) who work alongside veterinarians are highly valued and are often crucial to a program's success. Trained AMWs and EHWs can deliver parasite control programs and injectable temporary sterilisation of animals, assist vets to understand and navigate local sensitivities, are educators and surgical assistants and can provide feedback and data to assist Shires/Councils with strategic planning. They can undertake the groundwork to establish a program as they are well known and trusted by their community, resulting in a more efficient program. Local issues and sensitivities that need to be navigated in remote areas may be 'ceremony business, dog dreaming or sorry business' (Donelan AMRRIC 2006), and the program's interaction with politics, social tension and personal traumas need to be appropriately handled in urban communities as well.

Local AMW's can be a wealth of knowledge and provide vital language translation when required. They ensure that vets and other external staff are informed of cultural differences that they may otherwise be unaware of. "You can go backwards very quickly in these places if you don't have the right help" (Irving cited in Constable and Lucia 2011). The AMWs are best placed to obtain informed consent and higher numbers of consents that Non Aboriginal people to treat dogs (81% as against 53%) (Constable et al 2010).

Conclusion

Progress is being made in many communities regarding the improvement of animal health and welfare. It is being made through consultation, the building of trustful relationships, engagement, local employment and education programs. Aboriginal people in remote communities, on the whole, value their pets as those non- Aboriginal people on the east coast do. Over recent years the Federal Government has come to see the enormous benefits of dog health and welfare programs to improving the overall health and safety of remote communities through the work and lobbying of agencies like AMRRIC and RSPCA. This is a positive step forward and is allowing some communities to benefit from veterinary and education strategies that is making a real difference. Engaged communities who trust in the slow and steady respectful approach want to work with us to make the changes that bring benefits to all.

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About the author

Julia has a health background as a nurse and educator. She has held executive positions in the Non-Government, Not for Profit programs sector for 20 years. She spent many years in rural NSW, coordinating and facilitating programs for Non Indigenous and Indigenous families. She undertook studies in Aboriginal Community Development and Peace Studies whilst working in an Afghanistan NGO as a community development practitioner and a Change Manager in a Kabul based women's organisation. Julia moved to the NT eight years ago to coordinate Indigenous Health Programs in Southern Barkly remote communities, prior to becoming Executive Officer with AMRRIC. In the five years she has been with AMRRIC the organisation has undergone significant growth, is recognised nationally by the Federal Government as the Best Practice Model for remote Indigenous community dog heath programs. Julia remains committed to building sustainable, culturally respectful one health models for animal health and welfare management that improves overall health outcomes for remote communities and their residents.

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