



Australian Veterinary Association

Western Australia Division

Submission on 'Pause for paws:

Feedback on dog and cat laws in WA'



The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) is the only national association representing veterinarians in Australia. Founded in 1921, the AVA today represents 9500 members working in all areas of animal science, health and welfare.

Veterinary roles extend far beyond caring for the health and welfare of our pets and production animals. Veterinarians are the pathologists, field officers and inspectors that secure the safety of our food, ensure market access for our exports, and help to safeguard the human population from zoonotic diseases.

Dog and cat ownership is an integral part of the human-animal bond and plays an important and positive role in the health and wellbeing of the community. Benefits can include companionship, health and social improvements and assistance for people with special needs.

Discussion

Registration and identification of cats and dogs

The AVA supports the compulsory registration and permanent identification of dogs and cats. While annual or triannual registration provides an easy mechanism for maintaining accurate records that identify the owners of the animals, the registration period (whether annual, triannual, or lifetime) is secondary to the need to have up to date identification details. These are essential for the reunification of lost animals with their owners and in the enforcement of legislation around animal ownership and animal behaviour.

Both dogs and cats should be microchipped and their details recorded on a national database. It should be a requirement under the legislation that the owners of an animal keep the microchip database records up to date.

While a number of state governments have shifted to state-based microchip databases, the AVA prefers a national approach to these records and supports the existing national microchip registries. The Australian community is increasingly mobile, whether in short-term travel or permanent relocation. As such, it is essential that identification details of animals are accessible regardless of jurisdiction. Otherwise it becomes increasingly difficult to reunite lost animals with their owners.

While collars and tags are not as reliable as microchip, they can be a useful additional means of identification – particularly where the animal is found by someone who does not have access to a microchip reader.

Nuisance and aggressive dogs

Any dog of any size, breed or mix of breeds has the potential to be aggressive and to be declared dangerous so dogs should not be declared dangerous on the basis of breed or appearance. Each individual dog should be assessed based on its behaviour. The role of the dog owner is a critical factor with respect to the animal's behaviour.

Veterinarians share community concerns about aggressive dogs, but banning particular breeds is not the solution. In 2012 the AVA commissioned a report into the causes behind aggressive dogs and an alternative approach to address the issue. The report found that there was little evidence to support



banning particular dog breeds as a way of addressing canine aggression in the community. Instead, education of the public and legislative tools that equip animal management authorities to identify potentially dangerous individual dogs offer the best results in reducing incidents with aggressive dogs.

The key element rests on the early identification of potentially aggressive dogs on an individual basis. The report sets out the legislative framework to incorporate regulation of 'potentially dangerous dogs' alongside 'dangerous dogs' that have demonstrated aggression towards people or other pets.

Experience from around the world has shown that a truly successful dog bite prevention regime cannot rely on regulation alone. Its success depends on a comprehensive system of measures that support socially responsible pet ownership. In addition to dangerous dog regulations, the other components of an effective policy solution include:

- Effective identification and registration of all dogs
- A national reporting system to track dog bite incidents consistently with mandatory reporting of dog bite incidents to the national database
- Temperament testing encouraged by reduced registration costs, and able to be mandated by animal control authorities
- Education of the whole community including pet owners, breeders, parents and children as research has shown that education is effective in reducing dog bite incidents
- Adequate enforcement and resourcing to ensure compliance.

Greyhounds

The AVA opposes compulsory pet Greyhound muzzling. Muzzles may cause distress if they are improperly fitted, or introduced abruptly to an unaccustomed dog. Muzzles may prevent dogs from engaging in normal behaviour or from defending themselves against attack by another dog.

The mandatory use of muzzles on pet Greyhounds works against the goal of re-homing Greyhounds, as it creates a negative societal perception about these animals. It is likely that the historic requirement for use of muzzles in racing animals was linked to the illegal practice of live baiting. While recognising that recent media reports about live baiting practices may have heightened concerns about the potential threat that Greyhounds pose to the community, the evidence to support the conclusion that these animals are more dangerous as a result is equivocal.

Many young, untrained or unraced Greyhounds are adopted as pets every year. The compulsory muzzling of dogs that have not adequately adapted to wearing a muzzle may cause distress to the animal, and many new adoptive families would be unaware of the effect this may be having on their pet.

Retired Greyhounds should not be subjected to extensions of the rules of racing. Existing local animal laws provide adequately for the control and management of dogs in public places.

Mandatory muzzling has now been removed in Victoria, ACT and NSW.





Cat management

Environmental and conservation consequences of the large numbers of cats in Australia should be managed in a humane manner that takes into account the welfare of the cats and other affected animal species.

Cat management is the shared responsibility of state and local governments, animal shelters and members of the public who own or feed cats.

Owned cats should be identified by microchip and registered with the relevant state or local government. Reproduction should be controlled, in most cases by permanent surgical sterilisation. Cats should be contained or subject to a curfew in accordance with local legislation to protect the cat from accident and infectious disease, to prevent predation on wildlife and to reduce community nuisance. Contained cats require appropriate environmental enrichment to minimise stress.

While the AVA strongly supports the sterilisation of cats, the decision whether to sterilise, the timing of the procedure, and the nature of that procedure is best determined by the veterinarian in consultation with the owner. These decisions should not be determined by government legislation. The veterinarian is best placed to understand the specific health and management circumstances of individual animals in their care.

Combining the Cat and Dog Acts

The AVA supports greater consistency in the way in which companion animals are regulated, both between dogs and cats, and across different state and territory jurisdictions. While a single companion animal Act does not necessarily deliver this, the AVA recognises that there may be value in combining the Dog Act and Cat Act. This would help improve alignment between the two and would synchronise the future reviews of companion animal management legislation.

Recommendations

- That there should be a legislated requirement that all dogs and cats are microchipped with ownership details recorded on a national microchip database.
- That breed specific legislation is not an appropriate means of managing aggressive dogs in the community. Instead, local authorities need to be given the power to identify potentially dangerous dogs early and implement appropriate management of those animals. This needs to be coupled with increased community education on responsible pet ownership and safe behaviour around dogs.
- That greyhounds should not be subject to compulsory muzzling.

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