

Preventing dog attacks in the community

Introduction

The problem of dog attacks and how to prevent them is not new and is not exclusive to Australia. When examining the actions taken to deal with this problem across a number of countries, a familiar pattern emerges: from time to time a dog attack occurs which causes serious injury or death, usually of a child; there is widespread media coverage of the story and vilification of the reported type of dog involved. The public is outraged that the attack could have been allowed to happen, and governments are called upon to take urgent action to prevent the situation from recurring. Under sustained media pressure, the reaction of many governments, both in Australia and overseas, has been to introduce legislation to restrict the ownership and movement of dogs that have been declared as ‘dangerous’, and, in some jurisdictions, to ban or place severe restrictions on the ownership of certain dog breeds, cross-breeds or dog types through the introduction of breed-specific legislation (BSL). These punitive actions fail to prevent further attacks as they do not address the key issues: how to ensure all dog owners are made responsible for the actions of their dogs, and how to reduce the risk of any dog within the general population exhibiting aggressive or dangerous behaviour towards people.

Breed-specific legislation

In Australia legislation to control ‘dangerous’ dogs includes two different types of restrictions:

- Restrictions placed on individual dogs that have been officially declared as ‘menacing’ or ‘dangerous’ on the basis of the actual behaviour of the dog (ie following an aggressive incident).
- Restrictions placed on specific breeds or cross-breeds of dogs irrespective of their actual behaviour (known as breed-specific legislation or BSL).

The first breed-specific legislation introduced in Australia banned the importation of specific breeds of fighting dogs (the American pit bull terrier (pit bull terrier), Japanese tosa, dogo Argentino, fila Brasileiro and the Presa Canario). Of these breeds, only pit bull terriers were already present in any numbers in Australia. Subsequently over the period 2004-2010, legislation has been introduced in Queensland, South Australia, Victoria, New South Wales, Western Australia and Tasmania, placing restrictions on the keeping and management of these breeds (and in some cases cross-breeds) including the requirement that all dogs of a restricted breed be desexed. However there are no such restrictions in place in the ACT or NT, meaning that pit bull terriers continue to be legally bred in these jurisdictions (although in the ACT this is subject to the owner having a permit to keep sexually entire dog).

Over 20 countries worldwide now have BSL, in most cases based around the same five breeds, with pit bull terriers being the most common subject of restrictions as this is the most commonly owned breed or type of the five listed.

Is there evidence to support banning specific breeds?

While some studies indicate that the risk of serious attack associated with some breeds may be higher than others, they also show that many different breeds and types of dogs are involved in dog attacks. Furthermore, it is extremely difficult to avoid breed-specific bias in studies of the prevalence of dog attacks, as common breeds are more easily identified than less common breeds, and there is a tendency to group similar-looking dogs (including cross-breeds) according to a breed name, regardless of their origin. There are also difficulties with obtaining accurate data on dog bite/breed prevalence and with enforcing breed specific legislation because of the difficulty in determining a dog's breed 'beyond reasonable doubt'. While there is some evidence that certain breeds may be more risky than others, this does not correlate with those breeds currently restricted under BSL.

There is also considerable evidence that BSL has not had any measurable impact on the prevalence of dog bites or aggressive dogs in the community. RSPCA Victoria has collected data on the number of dogs (by breed) seized by councils and brought to their metropolitan shelters in Melbourne in the last financial year. These show that larger working breeds are more likely than other breeds of dog to be seized by council officers for menacing and/or dangerous behaviour but only two out of the total of 110 were pit bulls. In fact there were 95 dogs of 13 other breeds more commonly seized than pit bulls. Nationally, there have been at least 33 dog attack deaths in Australia since 1979, but apart from the dog that killed Ayen Chol, only one other dog has been described as a pit bull cross. A 2004 report published by the South Australian Dog and Cat Management Board listed the breeds of dog (in order of decreasing severity ranking) involved in dog attacks in South Australia across two reporting periods. The report highlights two important points: first, most of the breeds involved in attacks are not covered in BSL; and second, the relationship between dog attacks and breed is inconsistent over time.

The RSPCA's position

The RSPCA does not support breed specific legislation. Our view, based on the available international scientific evidence, is that any dog may be dangerous and that dogs should not be declared as 'dangerous' on the basis of breed. While we recognise that there is a strong genetic component in a dog's propensity for aggressive behaviour, their trigger point for aggression and capacity to inflict serious injury, these factors are not isolated to any specific breed. The RSPCA does not believe that BSL is in any way effective in preventing or reducing dog attacks or in protecting the public from dangerous dogs.

Our view is supported by animal welfare organisations in many other countries with experience of BSL. The UK RSPCA and the Dogs Trust share the view that BSL has had no effect on dog bite prevalence and that it should be repealed (see supporting documentation). Indeed, the experience of the UK since the introduction of BSL in 1991 is a salutary warning of the problems associated with this type of legislation. In London alone, the police spent £10 million over three years on kennelling and prosecution costs enforcing BSL. Over the same period, every health authority in London experienced an increase in the number of Emergency Department admissions for dog bites.

In addition to BSL failing to prevent dog attacks, the RSPCA has a number of significant problems with the implementation of this legislation. There are inherent ethical and operational difficulties in making life or death decisions about dogs purely on their physical appearance rather than their actual behaviour. Determining whether a particular dog is a pit bull or a pit bull cross is a subjective exercise and is a distressing process for both RSPCA staff and dog owners. For example, the recent expansion of BSL in Victoria to include cross-breeds and additional restrictions on the keeping of restricted breeds, have raised the following concerns with RSPCA Victoria:

- *Dealing with distressed owners who feel they have been unjustly treated when their dog has been seized on the basis of its appearance when it has not attacked an animal or person.*
- *Dealing with enquiries from dog owners concerned that their pet will be mistaken for a pit bull or declared as a restricted breed, removed and euthanased.*
- *An increase in the likelihood of dogs being surrendered for euthanasia due to the cost and inconvenience of implementing these restrictions. There has already been an increase in surrenders of Staffordshire terrier crosses since the legislative changes were announced and this is likely to continue.*
- *Due to the anticipated increase in quantity of seized dogs and/or increased duration of stay while owners go through the legal appeals process, our capacity to house other animals is likely to be reduced. Our rehoming rates will reduce and euthanasia rates will increase. Due to the tightening of restrictions, all dogs (puppies or adults) fitting the criteria of restricted breeds, including cross-breeds previously able to be rehomed because they were medically sound and of good temperament, will now have to be euthanased.*

A preventative strategy

Dog attacks are a serious problem that requires a serious and effective long-term solution. Encouragingly, many of the elements of what is required to reduce and eventually prevent this problem are already in place. What is required is a renewed effort on the part of governments, at both the state and local level, to implement further measures to encourage responsible dog ownership and reduce the risk of dog attacks and to enforce existing dog control legislation based on the actions of individual dogs, not on the basis of breed.

There is widespread agreement that a dog's individual tendency to bite depends on at least five interacting factors: heredity, early experience, socialisation and training, health, and the behaviour of the victim. To be successful, any preventative strategy needs to address all of these factors as well as provide mechanisms to protect the community as a whole. The RSPCA believes that a prevention strategy for dog attacks must contain the following key elements:

1. **Registration and microchipping of all dogs:** so that all dogs are traceable to their owners and that owners can be directly informed of their legal responsibilities.
2. **Control of unrestrained and free-roaming animals:** through the resourcing of local councils to enforce existing dog control provisions.
3. **Provisions for the control of menacing dogs:** measures are put in place to intervene early where a dog has exhibited repeated threatening behaviour but does not meet the definition of a dangerous dog.
4. **Desexing of non-breeding dogs:** male entire dogs are at greater risk of aggression and female entire dogs add to this risk by attracting entire males. Increased desexing rates can be achieved through early age desexing programs, mandatory desexing prior to rehoming and breeder registration for entire dogs.
5. **Education** of the public, and particularly children, in dog behaviour and bite prevention.
6. **Training of owners and dogs:** training programs based on positive reinforcement techniques provide an opportunity to educate owners on responsible dog ownership, basic dog behaviour and the use of appropriate training techniques
7. **Socialisation with people and other animals:** unsocialised dogs are more likely to show aggressive behaviour; designated off-leash areas provide opportunities for safe socialisation.

Many of these elements are already in place around Australia, including compulsory registration and microchipping, incentives for desexing, and regulations over the control of dogs in public places. Various state governments and local councils have implemented specific education strategies covering dog bite prevention, dog behaviour and responsible ownership. The RSPCA runs its own education programs on these same topics. The difficulty is that all these elements need to be consistently applied, enforced and adequately resourced: a piecemeal approach to this problem simply does not work. Legislation for microchipping, desexing, training and control of dogs in public places will not prevent dog attacks if there continue to be unregistered, unidentified, untrained and undesexed dogs at loose in the community. For example, the ACT has four recently created off-leash areas, lifetime dog registration and mandatory desexing. However, while off-leash areas are monitored by rangers, little other enforcement is done, i.e. of registration, microchips or desexed status. In Victoria, measures in place include discounted registration fees for a desexed and microchipped dog and there are designated off-leash areas to encourage socialisation. Yet the dog that attacked Ayan Chol was not registered, desexed nor under control.

The key problem with the current situation is that most local councils do not have the resources to apply the necessary elements in a consistent and sustained manner. Legislation and enforcement need to be proactive, but with limited resources they will remain reactive and reliant upon complaints from the community to highlight problems. For example, additional initiatives could include financial incentives for dog owners for completing training and education programs. Initially, registration fees could be discounted on production of proof of completion of a recognised training course or passing of a behavioural assessment. In time, this could become a prerequisite for registration and renewal of registration. Consideration should be given to mandatory behaviour assessments and training for dogs declared as menacing or dangerous. This would assist in reducing the likelihood of such behaviour escalating.

Further research is also needed into the extent to which genetics, and/or training influences a dog's behaviour towards humans and other animals, and its risk of impulsive or aggressive behaviour.

Where owners fail to behave responsibly, and where normal measures fail to prevent dogs from exhibiting aggressive behaviour, then the RSPCA accepts that stronger sanctions are necessary through provisions for the control of menacing or dangerous dogs. However, such sanctions must be based on the actions of individual dogs rather than their breed and should never be relied on as the primary means of addressing dog attack: they are a last resort. The RSPCA's position on such provisions is articulated in *Position Paper A1 Control of Dangerous Dogs* (Appendix 1).

In summary, what is needed in Australia is a long-term commitment from State, Territory and local governments to move away from breed-specific legislation towards a preventative approach to dog attacks that encompasses all the above key elements, is adequately resourced and includes both incentives for compliance and penalties for non-compliance.

Supporting documents

The following documents provide important supporting evidence for a preventative approach to dog attacks which should be read in conjunction with this information paper. All of them are publically available through the links provided.

1. American Veterinary Medical Association (2001) A community approach to dog bite prevention. JAVMA 218(11):1732-1749. Available from:
http://www.avma.org/public_health/dogbite/dogbite.pdf

2. Australian Veterinary Association (2011) Dangerous dog regulation and dog bite prevention. Available from:
http://www.ava.com.au/sites/default/files/AVA_website/pdfs/Dangerous%20dogs%20-%20a%20sensible%20solution%20FINAL.pdf
3. Colliers S (2006) Breed-specific legislation and the pit bull terrier: Are the laws justified? Journal of Veterinary behaviour 1:17-22. Available from:
<http://www.pitbullproject.ca/BreedSpecificLaws.pdf>
4. Kaspersson M (2008) On treating the symptoms and not the cause. Papers from the British Criminology Conference 8:205-225. Available from: <http://www.britsoccrim.org/v8.htm>
5. Kimble RM, Dallow N, Franklin R & Wallis B (2011) Dog bites in Australian children. Medical Journal of Australia 195(11/12):635-636. Available from:
http://www.mja.com.au/public/issues/195_11_121211/kim11319_fm.html
6. Klaassen B, Buckley JR and Esmail A (1996) Does the Dangerous Dogs Act protect against animal attacks: a prospective study of mammalian bites in the Accident and Emergency department. Injury 27(2):89-91
7. RSPCA (UK) (2010) Response to DEFRA consultation on dangerous dogs. Available from:
<http://content.www.rspca.org.uk/cmsprd/Satellite?blobcol=urldata&blobheader=application%2Fpdf&blobkey=id&blobnocache=false&blobtable=MungoBlobs&blobwhere=1233005600033&ssbinary=true>
8. Sacks J, Sinclair L, Gilchrist J et al. (2000) Breeds of dogs involved in fatal human attacks in the United States between 1979 and 1998. JAVMA 217(6):836-240. Available from:
<http://www.cdc.gov/homeandrecreationalafety/images/dogbreeds-a.pdf>
9. Snyder J (2005) Dangerous dog management. Urban Animal Management Conference Proceedings pp13-17. Available from:
http://www.aiam.com.au/resources/files/proceedings/canberra2005/PUB_Pro05_JohnSnyder_Dangerousdogmanagement.pdf
10. Thompson P (2004) Aggression effects - from a human perspective and solutions. Urban Animal Management Conference Proceedings pp37-38. Available from:
http://www.aiam.com.au/resources/files/proceedings/adelaide2004/PUB_Pro04_Thompson_AggressionEffects.pdf
11. Australian Veterinary Association (2012) Dangerous dogs - a sensible solution. Policy and model legislative framework. Available from:
http://www.ava.com.au/sites/default/files/AVA_website/pdfs/Dangerous%20dogs%20-%20a%20sensible%20solution%20FINAL.pdf

Control of dangerous dogs

(adopted 01/08/08)

1 Definition of a dangerous dog

- 1.1 RSPCA Australia defines a dangerous dog as any dog which aggressively attacks a person or other animal causing physical injury or death, or behaves in a manner that a reasonable person would believe poses an unjustified imminent threat of physical injury or death.
- 1.2 Exceptions to this definition should be considered where a dog has been clearly provoked into attacking a human or other animal in self-defence, defence of a human or their property, or where a dog kept as a companion animal instinctively attacks an animal normally considered as prey.

2 Breed

- 2.1 RSPCA Australia considers that any dog of any size, breed or mixture of breeds may be dangerous and thus dogs should not be declared dangerous on the basis of breed.
- 2.2 However, it is recognised that there is a strong genetic component in a dog's propensity for aggressive behaviour, their trigger point for aggression and their capacity to inflict serious injury. These factors should be taken into consideration when choosing a suitable dog and in their subsequent socialisation and training.

3 Responsibility

Responsibility for the behaviour of a dog rests with the owner. This principle is firmly established in existing Dog Acts (or their equivalent).

4 Legislation

Provisions for the control of dangerous dogs should be incorporated into existing Dog Acts (or their equivalent). As these provisions will be administered by local government officers it is important that the legislation is drawn in such a way as to provide simple straightforward definitions, direction and courses of action. Local government officers should be provided with sufficient support, training and information to allow them to administer such legislation in a fair and appropriate manner.

5 Declaration of a dangerous dog

- 5.1 Declaration of a dangerous dog should be made by the relevant municipal authority on the basis of known behaviour of the dog in accordance with the above definition. A statutory declaration supported by appropriate evidence of the dog's behaviour is the minimum required to initiate the declaration of a dangerous dog.
- 5.2 Written notification must be provided to the owner of the intention to declare a dog as dangerous, setting out the reasons for the decision and terms of the proposed declaration.

- 5.3 Where an owner objects to such a declaration they must be given the opportunity to appeal the decision within a reasonable time (minimum of 28 days). A range of evidence such as veterinary reports, independent behavioural assessments, statements from community members, police etc may be submitted to support such an appeal.

7 Management of declared dangerous dogs

7.1 Identification

All declared dangerous dogs must be permanently identified by microchip (see policy statement **A6.3**). In addition all declared dangerous dogs must wear an approved collar which is coloured in such a way as to clearly indicate to an observer that the dog has been declared dangerous. All access points to a property on which a declared dangerous dog is confined must also be marked by an approved sign which clearly indicates to all adults and children that a declared dangerous dog is on the property.

7.2 Registry

All declared dangerous dogs must be registered with a specific national registry.

7.3 Control

All declared dangerous dogs in public places must be under effective physical control via an appropriate leash and be required to wear an effective (properly fitted) muzzle.

7.4 Desexing

All declared dangerous dogs must be desexed.

7.5 Confinement

- a When on its owner's property, a declared dangerous dog must be maintained in an escape-proof enclosure or indoors.
- b Where a declared dangerous dog is held in an enclosure, it must be of adequate size to provide the opportunity for the dog to move freely about and must contain appropriate shelter, enrichment, and accommodation. The enclosure should be sited near the owner's house to enable direct access to the enclosure and for the confined dog to be visible from the house at all times.
- c Declared dangerous dogs should be given the same provision for regular exercise as other dogs (see policy statement **A7.6**).

7.6 Notification

When an owner of a declared dangerous dog moves residence/locality they must notify the municipal authorities at the previous and new locations, or, if the move is within the resident municipality, the change of address must be notified.

7.7 Right of property access

Local government officers should have right of access to residential properties on which a declared dangerous dog is confined for the purpose of ensuring that all legislative requirements are being met by the owner

8 Importation of dogs to Australia

The importation of dogs to Australia must comply with the *Customs (Prohibited Imports) Regulations 1956*. If a dog being held in quarantine is considered by an experienced animal handler to be exhibiting behaviour indicative of a dangerous dog, then the dog must be submitted to a comprehensive behavioural examination by a qualified behavioural specialist whilst in quarantine. If the dog fails such an examination the owner should be given the options of returning the dog to the country of origin or euthanasia.

9 Menacing dogs

- 9.1 The category of ‘menacing dog’, may be used in legislation to apply to dogs that have repeatedly exhibited threatening behaviour (such as rushing at or chasing a person without provocation), but do not meet the definition of a dangerous dog.
- 9.2 Declaration of a dog as a ‘menacing dog’ must be subject to the same process and opportunity for appeal as that specified for a dangerous dog (see section 5).
- 9.3 All declared menacing dogs in public places should be required to be under effective control via an appropriate leash. Declared menacing dogs should not be subject to the additional restrictions placed upon declared dangerous dogs other than being confined on their owner’s property such that they cannot continue to pose a threat.
- 9.4 Declared menacing dogs should be required to undergo behavioural consultation with a qualified behavioural specialist to prevent their behaviour from escalating to that of a dangerous dog.

See also - [Policy A7 Dog management](#)