The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) is the only national organisation representing veterinarians in Australia. Its 8500 members come from all fields within the veterinary profession. Clinical practitioners work with companion animals, horses, farm animals, such as cattle and sheep, and wildlife. Government veterinarians work with our animal health, public health and quarantine systems while other members work in industry for pharmaceutical and other commercial enterprises. We have members who work in research and teaching in a range of scientific disciplines. Veterinary students are also members of the Association.

The AVA strongly encourages the desexing of dogs and cats. This is an important part of responsible pet ownership and has positive benefits for animals and owners.

But should it be mandatory?
The issue of mandatory desexing has been raised from a number of perspectives. These include looking at it as a mechanism to reduce:

- the number of unwanted dogs
- the number of unwanted cat
- aggression and dog bites.

While the financial implications for State governments is minimal, compulsory desexing is a substantial regulatory impost and cost on the community, local government and potentially to the animals themselves.

This does not necessarily mean the proposal should be rejected, but it does mean that the potential costs and benefits should be weighed carefully.

South Australian dog population
South Australia has a reasonably stable dog population – it has hovered at around 300,000 for the past decade. Euthanasia rates in shelters are limited to behavioural and health reasons. So, unlike cats, there is no evidence that the state has an oversupply of dogs.

Marsden et al (2008) argues that, as relatively few puppies are relinquished to shelters, breeding by owned dogs is not a significant contributing factor in shelter admissions and euthanasia statistics.

South Australian cat population
There are three distinct populations of cats in Australia. Denny and Dickman noted that the various populations of cats in Australia, can be categorised as domestic, feral or stray (or semi-owned).

Denny and Dickman observe that stray cats living in self-perpetuating populations in urban, peri-urban and highly-modified rural habitats, constitute possibly the largest sub-group of cats in Australia and remain largely unrecognised. In terms of legislation and cat control programs, most attention has been paid to owned domestic and feral cats, with little information on colonies of cats that exploit highly-modified habitats in urban fringe and rural areas.

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Amongst the responsibly owned population, there is currently a very high level of desexing. However, there remain too many accidental litters. Veterinarians are increasingly recommending that cats be desexed prior to maturity. This represents a cultural shift within the community. There has traditionally been a low understanding of the age at which cats can have a litter – this takes time to change. Nonetheless, responsible cat owners should be receptive to education around this issue and to joint efforts by veterinarians, government, and welfare organisations that highlight the importance of desexing cats prior to their first litter.

Dealing with other populations of cats is more difficult. The very low reclaim rates suggest that the vast majority of cats that come into shelters are either unowned, or have owners with very low levels of attachment to their cats. Mandatory desexing is unlikely to affect these animals. This is a striking contrast with dogs. Historically, society has viewed the two types of companion animal differently. Measures should be used that help move the community to feeling the same level of responsibility for cats as they currently do for dogs. Measures to achieve this could include legislation that requires cats to be formally owned and registered, as is currently in place for dogs.

The AVA does not support trap – neuter – return (TNR) programs as it is usually not possible to control the entry of new cats into the colony, and the long term welfare of the cats is generally very poor. Additionally, un-owned cats have a serious impact on Australian wildlife, and can be the cause of considerable community nuisance, whether or not they have been sterilised.

Links to aggression
While there is some evidence that desexing has an impact on behaviour, it is just one of many factors. Desexing is certainly not a silver bullet solution to the issue of dog aggression and attacks, and, once the numbers of dogs and likely rates of compliance are taken into account, could result in an insignificant measurable effect on dog attacks in South Australia.

In 2012 the AVA commissioned a report into the causes behind aggressive dogs and alternative approaches to address the issue. The report found that education of the public and legislative tools that equip animal management authorities to identify potentially dangerous dogs on an individual rather than breed basis, offer the best results in reducing incidents with aggressive dogs.²

The impact of the environment and learning are critical to the behaviour of a dog. The tendency of a dog to bite is dependent on at least five interacting factors:³⁴⁵:

- heredity (genes)
- early experience
- socialisation and training
- health (physical and psychological) and
- victim behaviour

A recent paper by Gary Patronek et al, “Co-occurrence of potentially preventable factors in 256 dog bite-related fatalities in the United States (2000-2009)” examined fatal dog bites in the United States over nine years. Risk factors for different variables could not be calculated for the study, but the variables that were found present in fatal attacks were:

- absence of someone to intervene
- the dog and victim were unknown to each other
- the dog was not desexed

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² AVA 2012 Dangerous Dogs – A sensible solution
⁴ Seksel 2002 “Report to the NSW Department of Local Government on Breed Specific Legislation issues relating to control of dangerous dogs
⁵ Snyder 2005 “Dangerous Dog Management” National Urban Animal management Conference, Canberra; Australian Veterinary Association
Importantly, in the vast majority of fatalities at least four factors were in place. This is very relevant when we consider isolated measures aimed at addressing dog aggression.\textsuperscript{7}

Mandatory desexing would, at best, address only one of these variables. Initiatives targeted at improving individual behaviour and improved understanding about how to care for and interact with dogs would address multiple variables and hence have a much greater potential impact on dog attacks within the home and the community.

Inadvertent consequences
While there is little evidence around mandatory desexing, there are number of potential consequences that should be considered:

- Given the state’s reasonably static dog population, there is a risk that South Australia would end up with an undersupply of dogs.
- In regard to dogs, there is a risk that it would limit the pool of breeding stock in South Australia and increase reliance on purebred breeding. It could also put pressure on the supply of dogs and lead to increased importation of animals from the eastern states.
- Owners of ‘non-compliant’ animals may avoid veterinary care, leading to poor health and welfare outcomes for the animal.
- Compulsory desexing could overemphasise the perceived links between aggression and desexing – leading to parents taking ill-advised risks in leaving unsupervised children with dogs.

Conclusion
In considering the issue of mandatory desexing, the AVA seeks to balance the potential benefits of such a policy with the costs to the community and animals. Less invasive options that can achieve positive outcomes are also considered in this.

While the AVA encourages desexing of companion animals, it does not believe this should be mandatory. The AVA questions the degree to which it would have a measurable effect on population levels in South Australia. In addition, there are a number of potentially negative impacts from such a regime.

Instead, positive benefits could come from a ‘lighter touch’ regulation (like cat registration – which already has a high level of acceptance amongst the pet-owning population) coupled with targeted education programs.

Recommendations
- Compulsory registration of cats be introduced – similar to what is currently in place for dogs.
- Targeted desexing education campaigns be initiated on the importance of desexing cats prior to maturity – these could be done in partnership with governments, veterinarians, and welfare organisations.

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