

Dangerous dogs – a sensible solution
Australian Veterinary Association policy briefing
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Background

Periodically the community is faced with horrific dog bite incidents, and sadly the victims are often children. These incidents tend to attract extensive media attention, accompanied by simplistic 'solutions' to the problem of dog aggression. These events are devastating for the families and naturally draw emotional responses from the community, putting politicians and governments under pressure to address the issue in a public way.

Policy responses to dog bites have increasingly turned to banning or controlling particular breeds of dogs (breed-specific legislation or BSL). Under pressure from the media, governments have established regulatory responses that give the community a false sense of security, allowing them to believe that they are safer from aggressive dogs. However, because these measures do not actually solve the underlying problems, similar dog bite incidents continue.

Summary

Most dog bites take place in homes with familiar family pets, and most people bitten by dogs are children under 10 years of age. No bite prevention strategy can be successful without taking steps to reduce these incidents, numerically far greater than bites taking place in public places and caused by unknown dogs.

The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) has released a comprehensive report, *Dangerous dogs – a sensible solution* which sets out the scientific evidence about dog bite incidents, and explores the factors that influence a dog's tendency to bite. It demonstrates the ineffectiveness of breed-specific legislation in addressing aggressive behaviour in dogs, explaining that this approach does not increase public safety and is unworkable.

The report highlights a scientific evidence-based policy alternative that combines recognition and control of 'potentially dangerous dogs' along with 'dangerous dogs'. But regulation alone cannot reduce dog bite incidents. It must be combined with a strong system encouraging socially-responsible pet ownership, enforcing compliance with pet identification, registration and restraint rules, while educating the whole community including children about safety around dogs. The report also emphasises the importance of a national register of dog bite incidents and mandatory reporting of incidents to provide a solid evidence base for future policy decisions.

A sensible solution

The AVA is the only national professional association of veterinarians in Australia. It represents 7500 members working in all areas of animal science, health and welfare, and its members include the nation's leading experts in animal health and animal behaviour.

The AVA has invested in research to review the scientific research and set out a sensible evidence-based policy solution for state and territory governments to address this problematic and concerning issue. The strategy combines successful approaches from Oregon (USA) and Calgary (Canada), along with model legislation developed by the US Humane Society and aggressive dog classifications developed at a conference of Australian animal management professionals convened by Urban Animal Management (at the time a committee of the AVA).

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.

Only a comprehensive approach that addresses the complex causes of dog bites can provide a real reduction on dog bite incidents in the community.

Contact

For further information, contact Marcia Balzer, National Communications Manager on communications@ava.com.au, (02) 9431 5060 or 0430 175 310.