

Greyhound Racing in Victoria Inquiry Findings

Comment from the Australian Veterinary Association

July 2015



Submitted to:

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The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) is the national organisation representing veterinarians in Australia. Our 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.

Executive Summary

The exposé that *Four Corners* aired in February this year demonstrated serious and widespread animal welfare abuse within the greyhound racing industry. While veterinarians and others have spoken out about live baiting and other serious animal welfare concerns within the industry in the past, the extent of the infractions appears to have surprised industry participants.

This demonstrates serious shortcomings within the industry with respect to animal welfare, and a complete failure to adequately investigate, address and remedy unacceptable animal welfare attitudes and practices. As the final reports by the Racing Integrity Commissioner and the Chief Veterinary Officer have found, an independent regulatory authority is now essential to protect the interests of all animals involved in greyhound racing.

Greyhound owners, trainers and service providers who treat dogs well and would never condone or even consider live baiting have nothing to fear from an independent authority. Those who care appropriately for their animals, in line with community expectations, will be the winners if those who don't are identified and removed from the industry.

Live baiting is only one of the numerous animal welfare issues associated with greyhound racing. Existing rules for greyhound protection are not functioning effectively. Veterinarians have concerns about how greyhounds are bred and reared, trained, raced and their post-racing fate – including the unacceptable rates of animal wastage. Whatever improved integrity arrangements are made and legislated, there is a clear role for a significant increase in veterinary input to ensure adequate standards of animal welfare are maintained and enforced to the satisfaction of the community.

The evidence is overwhelming and compelling that major changes must occur in the Victorian greyhound industry if it is to continue. In fact, its very existence depends on successfully combatting the animal welfare issues within the industry and restoring community faith in its integrity.

The investigations and final reports of the Racing Integrity Commissioner and the Chief Veterinary Officer are extensive and deliver many recommendations that will go a long way in improving the integrity of the industry.

Welfare of greyhounds

Animal welfare must be at the forefront of government when considering these recommendations. The public have very strong and passionate expectations on how greyhounds (and other animals) are treated. The industry must meet these expectations and acknowledge that it is the greyhounds that make the sport and they deserve the best management and treatment available. The interests of the greyhounds must rank higher than the interests of the industry or any individual participant.

As recommended in the Chief Veterinary Officer's final report, the content of the *Code of Practice for the Operation of Greyhound Establishments* (COPG) and the *GRV Local Rules* must be strengthened to improve the standards of animal welfare. Strengthening the COPG by documenting minimum standards of a greyhound's exercise, socialisation, handling, housing, transportation, enrichment and management for retirement are all important areas that must be addressed. As a high percentage of greyhound pups bred for racing do not go on to race, there is an

unacceptable high rate of wastage – which is due in large part to the breeding and rearing methods used. The lack of adequate socialisation and training of these puppies mean that they are often not suitable for rehoming.

There should be a publicly available strategic plan to advance the welfare of all greyhounds in the industry – whether or not they ultimately race. Public reporting of progress towards the animal welfare targets in the plan should be mandated.

Veterinary involvement at all stages of greyhounds' lives is key, including advice on breeding, early socialisation, routine care, healthy and humane training practices, injury prevention and treatment and post-racing welfare.

Increasing autopsy powers of the GRV by enhancing the *GRV Local Rules* to mandate that all deaths of greyhounds are reported to GRV and that permission for disposal of the carcass is commendable. There are real concerns within the veterinary profession that healthy greyhounds are being presented for euthanasia when they are of no further use to the industry. Greyhounds aged between four to 12 months have little contact with veterinarians or regulatory bodies and it is during this stage that an extremely high number of pups fail to make the racing grade and are sadly euthanased.

Registration of greyhound establishments as domestic animal businesses or licensing of breeders must also be clarified so that compliance and enforcement can be achieved.

Although there are a number of animal welfare initiatives listed as being promoted by GRV, a review of these initiatives is advisable to ascertain whether the appropriate outcomes are being achieved – in particular data collection and capture, animal welfare education for participants and greyhound adoption programs.

Education

A recommendation from the Racing Integrity Commissioner is that GRV introduce structured, comprehensive training to staff who conduct property inspections or who are otherwise involved in the welfare of greyhounds generally, including Stewards, welfare officers and other members of the Integrity Department.

Not only do staff need to be further educated in the welfare aspect of greyhounds, most importantly, breeders and trainers must be comprehensively educated. Compliance to all GRV Local Rules, the Code of Practice for Greyhound Establishments and all other Acts relevant to greyhound welfare must be demanded by those participating in the greyhound industry. An extensive education campaign must be developed and undertaken that focuses on standards of socialisation, handling, enrichment and management of greyhounds.

The recommendation from the Chief Veterinary Officer that Greyhound Racing Victoria considers how best it can inform its members of their animal welfare obligations is probably the area that requires the most focus. Appropriate educational training, toolkits and resources must be developed by GRV for use by current and future participants within the industry.

Establishment of an independent integrity body

As recommended in the final report of the Racing Integrity Commissioner, the establishment of an independent integrity body should occur. If, as recommended, the independent integrity body would assume the accountability across all three racing codes, it is imperative that considerations are made to the formation of such a body.

Industry participants should be excluded from the independent integrity body in order to maintain the perception of independence and avoid conflicts of interest. The body should also consist of at least two registered veterinarians proposed by the Australian Veterinary Association to ensure the interests of both greyhounds and horses are appropriately protected. Veterinarians bring credibility, trust, independence, accountability and expertise as a skill set. They have a professional responsibility to put the welfare of the animals above any other interest.

We recommend that the authority should report publicly on all complaints investigated and that there should be a publicly available strategic plan to advance the welfare of all greyhounds and horses within the industry. Public reporting of progress towards the targets in the plan in relation to animal welfare should be mandated.

Whether this is funded by government or cross-funded by the industries, it must be appropriately resourced so it has the ability to conduct thorough investigations.

Board composition

A recommendation of the Racing Integrity Commissioner's final report was for the government to legislate that appropriately qualified persons with a background in animal welfare are appointed to each of the three racing code Boards in recognition of the importance of animal welfare issues in their respective codes. The Chief Veterinary Officer also recommended that the *Racing Act 1958* requires the Greyhound Racing Victoria Board to include a member who is an expert on animal welfare and/or ethics.

The Australian Veterinary Association believes that at least one member of each of these boards should be a registered veterinarian. Veterinarians are one of the most trusted professions and these appointments would go a long way in meeting community's expectations of integrity within the industry – starting at the top.

GRV Inspector Powers

The powers of GRV Inspectors certainly need to be increased in line with DAA and POCTAA authorised inspectors. This will provide them with much greater powers of entry to premises and to search and seize – at any time. They would no longer require written consent to enter a property. This is imperative so that the welfare of greyhounds can be monitored and compliance is ensured. That GRV initiate formalised agreements/Memoranda of Understanding with relevant animal welfare groups. Such agreements to include arrangements for the exchange of information and immediate reporting of alleged and suspected animal cruelty related issues in the Greyhound industry to relevant authorities. GRV may also consider working together with relevant animal welfare groups to develop an education campaign for the benefit of the industry and the public in relation to raising awareness of animal cruelty issues.

Conclusion

The AVA is impressed with the detailed final reports of both the Racing Integrity Commissioner and the Chief Veterinary Officer and is confident that their recommendations, once implemented, will assist in a major shake-up of the greyhound racing industry in Victoria and will be welcomed by the public. The welfare of the animals must be the highest priority for those charged with implementing change and the AVA would be pleased to participate in ongoing strategic discussions with the government in this very difficult issue.