TAIL-DOCKING OF PUPPIES

Background:
There are about four hundred breeds of dogs recognised world-wide. Approximately one quarter of these recognised breeds are traditionally docked. In Australia there are 172 breeds recognised by the Australian National Kennel Council (ANKC). Of these, 59 breeds (34%) are traditionally docked. In Australia breed standards do not require an individual dog to be docked. This means that traditionally docked dogs with tails may compete in the show ring provided they are appropriately registered.

The practice of tail docking appears to have begun in Britain or Western Europe in the Middle Ages. Many theories have been proposed for the beginning of the practice. These theories have included tax evasion, rabies prevention, production of bob-tail puppies (in accordance with Lamarck’s erroneous notion of “acquired characteristics”), prevention of back injury, increase of speed for the docked dog as well a method of prevention of tail damage due to fighting or ratting.

The procedure:
The Animal Welfare Act 1992 (the Act) allows anyone to dock the tail of a puppy less than 10 days of age. The Act also requires that puppies older than this age must be docked by a registered Veterinary Surgeon using appropriate anaesthesia. Most puppies are docked between two and five days of age. This is achieved with one person restraining the puppy and another person, the operator, either severing the tail at a pre-determined length according to breed standards with scissors, or placing a ligature of either a rubber band or thread around the tail. An attempt to sterilise the site with antiseptic may precede the surgery. However, local anaesthesia is generally not used during the procedure on puppies of this age even if the operation is performed by Veterinarians. Veterinary surgeons may then suture the stump with an absorbable suture material. It should be noted that anaesthetics are only available for use by Veterinary Surgeons.

The dew-claws, which are the digits on the inside of the limb just above the paw, may be excised at the same time with the wound either cauterised or sutured. It should be noted that Section 19(2)(e) of the Act permits the removal of dew-claws by anyone at any age. The Committee believes that this clause deserves amendment.

The puppies are then returned to their mother either directly or after transport from a Veterinary Surgery.

The ANKC “Code of Practice for the Tail Docking of Dogs” limits the procedure of tail-docking to either Veterinary Surgeons or to an experienced breeder. The ANKC Code of Practice defines an experienced breeder as a person who has been involved with the breed for at least five years and who has personally docked, under instruction, at least three litters of puppies.

Increasingly, Veterinary Surgeons are declining to dock tails. This suggests that an increasing percentage of pups are docked by lay operators.
The “Pro-Docking” Argument:
Advocates of tail-docking are almost exclusively dog breeders, and mostly breeders of traditionally docked breeds. These “pro-dockers” argue that docking should be allowed to continue for the following reasons:

• To prevent injury when hunting type dogs work in “close cover” (thick undergrowth);
• To prevent injury to and nuisance caused by the whipping tails of dogs in the home;
• To maintain health and hygiene (matting and faecal contamination around the anus);
• To prevent abandonment of puppies obtained which then fail to “look like” the breed chosen;
• Because the breed looks better, more balanced, or “normal” without a tail; or
• To make the breed look more fierce (guard dogs etc).

“Pro-dockers” contend that the tail-docking procedure is either painless or causes so little pain that the puppies’ welfare is not compromised. The “pro-dockers” also contend that, in most instances, the benefits of docking outweigh any brief discomfort. “Pro-dockers” cite a senior German academic veterinarian who believes that puppies at this age feel little or no pain because their nervous systems are not yet fully developed. The only published study on tail-docking has shown that puppies shrieked during the procedure. However, that vocalisation ceased after an average of 138 seconds. The “shrieking” range was between 8 seconds and 840 seconds.

Breeders, when questioned often say that they tail-dock puppies because they could not sell the puppies unless the procedure had been done. Owners of puppies on the other hand, often state that they did not know they had a choice of buying a puppy with a tail. Many people within the community still do not realise that most “tail-less” dogs are born with tails that are cut off at 2-5 days of age.

The “Anti-Docking” Argument:
Most animal welfare groups as well as the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) are opposed to tail-docking. The AVA states that:

“Cosmetic tail-docking and ear-cropping of dogs are unnecessary, unjustifiable surgical alterations and are detrimental to the animal’s welfare”

A recent survey of veterinarians and dog breeders in Queensland showed that eighty-three (83) veterinarians out of one hundred (100) were opposed to tail docking. In the same survey twenty-five (25) dog breeders out of one hundred (100) thought that the tail-docking procedure caused no pain whilst all veterinarians surveyed thought it caused some pain. Seventy-six (76) veterinarians out of one hundred (100) stated that they believed the procedure caused significant to severe pain. In this survey eighty-four (84) breeders out of one hundred (100) were in favour of tail-docking puppies.

There has been a marked change in the understanding of, and control of, pain in foetal and neo-natal humans in the last two decades. Until recently, major surgery was performed on new-born babies, especially those born pre-term, with out anaesthesia or analgesia. Similar to the “pro-dockers” argument today, the lack of maturity, especially the lack of myelination of nerves in the spinal cord, was taken as evidence for failure of pain transmission or perception.
Studies have shown that:

- Sensory nerve endings develop before motor nerve endings;
- Touch stimulates a response when applied to any part of the human body by the first ¼ of gestation;
- Stimulation of pain receptors, transmission through the spinal cord, and a response at the cortical (higher brain) level can be demonstrated by the end of the first third of gestation in rats, lambs and humans;
- Signals inhibiting pain responses in the spinal cord develop later than the pain response pathways;
- Stress can be demonstrated both behaviourally and biochemically in un-anaesthetised neo-nates; and

Stimulation of the nervous system at early stages of its development can affect the receptivity of the nervous system in the future. viii

It has been concluded based on studies of animals and humans “that pre-term infant is, if anything, super-sensitive to painful stimuli when compared with the full term infant” ix

While a person can never assume that pain is comparable between humans and animals, the body of evidence supports the conclusion that neo-natal animals experience pain which is at least comparable, if not greater, than their adult counterparts including humans. The burden of proof lies with those who do not believe that tail-docking causes significant pain, not with those who believe that it does.

It is certainly accepted that some dogs may injure their tails whilst in the field, in kennels or in a home. However, the incidence of tail injuries is exceptionally low and examination of the data has shown that there is no statistical difference between the incidence of tail injuries in un-docked breeds versus docked breeds x. Records of the first 2,350 consultations one emergency clinic in Sydney show that, only three visits were for dog tail injuries, and all of these visits related to problems in the immediate post-docking period. xi

Only a small percentage of dogs of the traditional hunting breeds are used in the field as most are now acquired as household pets. The docking of an entire breed to potentially protect the tails of a very few members of that breed that may obtain a tail injury is inappropriate. The procedure of tail-docking is not confined to pure bred dogs. The number of cross-bred puppies docked to make them appear more like their progenitor breed is unknown.

“Pro-dockers” argue that owners will be either unable or unwilling to cope with occurrences of matted hair and faecal soiling around the anus as well as the potential tail injuries. This may lead to welfare concerns and/or the abandonment of the un-docked dog. The “pro-dockers” conclusion is that those breeds should be docked. The “anti-dockers” contend that encouraging both better owner knowledge and breed selection as well as responsible animal care would minimise this problem. Veterinarians see many cases of hair matting and faecal soiling in docked individual dogs. Breeds that have been traditionally docked, ostensibly to avoid these problems, are matched by virtually identical breeds that are not docked. Such examples would be the Pembroke Corgi (docked) vs. Cardigan Corgi (not docked). It can therefore be assumed that the problem is not the tail of the dog but the level of the care of the owner.
“Anti-dockers” contend that the perceived problem of the appearance of a tail on a traditionally docked dog is simply lack of general knowledge and education. “Anti-dockers” believe that both time and further education would enable all dog owners to accept the appearance of traditionally docked dogs with tails.

The International Situation

In England, tail-docking has been illegal except when performed by a Veterinary Surgeon since July 1993. The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons at the same time declared that the docking of tails other than for therapeutic or prophylactic reasons was unethical. Repeated unethical behaviour may be held to amount to unprofessional conduct, and become the subject of disciplinary action. They later (1996) stated that such docking…is capable of amounting to conduct disgraceful in a professional respect. They describe such docking as unacceptable mutilation.iii

Tail-docking has been banned in Finland since 1996, Switzerland since 1 July 1998, and is also banned in both Sweden and Norway. Germany banned tail-docking on 1 May 1998 with an exception for dogs that are used for hunting. These puppies must be off-spring of parents that were specifically hunting dogs, not just hunting breeds.

An informal survey conducted by e-mail of veterinarians on an international e-mail discussion list elicited six responses from the above European countries. All practitioners stated that they were not seeing any significant increase in tail injuries subsequent to the ban.

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ii The maximum dose for Lignocaine is 3 mg/kg, and the solution is supplied at 20 mg/kg. Even a large breed pup at three days of age, weighing perhaps 500gm, could only receive 1.5 mg or 0.075 ml of solution. Overdosage may result in convulsions and respiratory failure and / or cardiac depression, arrhythmias, and death.

iii Australian National Kennel Council: National Policy Document on Tail Docking


viAVA Members’ Directory and Policy Compendium, B.2.3.1, 1997


viii “Fetal sentience and fetal surgery” by PJ McCullagh in “Recent Advances in Anaesthesia and Analgesia 20”, Ch 6, pp 107-121; and personal communication with Peter McCullagh, Senior Fellow, Developmental Physiology Group, Division of Molecular Medicine, The John Curtin School of Medical Research, The Australian National University

ix Pain and analgesia in the newborn. Fitzgerald and McIntosh, Arch. Dis. Chil. 64:441-443, 1989

x Association between tail injuries and docking in dogs PGG Darke et al, Veterinary Record 116: 409,1985

xi Cosmetic tail docking of dogs; R.K. Wansborough, Australian Veterinary Journal 74 (1) 59-63, 1996

xii pers.comm. Walter Beswick, Chairman, Preliminary Investigations Committee, Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons