

Behavioural “Problems”: Prevention as the Key to reducing the Number of Dogs euthanased in Australian Animal Shelters

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Word count: 990

Introduction

Why do so many dogs end up in pounds and how can this be managed and, ultimately, prevented? In 2009-2010, 20,177 dogs were euthanased in RSPCA shelters across Australia; 10,784 of these met this fate for “behavioural problems” (RSPCA, 2010). Behavioural issues remain a major factor in relinquishment of dogs to shelter organisations, but Mills (2003) suggests that classification of behavioural traits as “problems” is a misguided interpretation of an animal’s innate attempt to adapt to its environment. Recent scientific research has explored factors involved in the relinquishment of dogs to pounds (Diesel *et al.*, 2010), the protocols surrounding behavioural assessments of such dogs (Mornement *et al.*, 2010) and factors affecting obedience in dogs (Braem & Mills, 2010). Ultimately, this current research provides up-to-date insight into the shortcomings of current re-homing legislation and also some points to consider in the bid to reduce wastage of man’s best friend.

Discussion

Diesel *et al.* (2010) undertook a 12-month descriptive study to explore characteristics of former dog owners and the dogs they have surrendered to re-homing institutes. Data collection was achieved by having owners complete a compulsory questionnaire at the time of relinquishment in 14 Dogs Trust centres across the United Kingdom. The results of the survey were analysed according to where owners had obtained their dog: Dogs Trust (DT), other rescue organisations (ORK) or private sources such as pet shops and breeders (PO). It was found that a large proportion of respondents (83.7%) did not actively research aspects of dog ownership before obtaining their dog, which may have led to inappropriate breed choice for their lifestyle. PO respondents were more likely to have obtained sexually intact purebred dogs and often received them as gifts, which draws attention to the lack of regulation surrounding the sale of privately bred dogs.

Behavioural issues accounted for 48.5% of relinquishments for the combined DT and ORK groups, which is perhaps a reflection of inadequate behavioural assessment of shelter dogs before re-homing, an idea expanded on by Mornement *et al.* (2010). While this study is based in the United Kingdom, data collected by the RSPCA in Australia indicate that the proportion of dogs relinquished due to behavioural issues is much the same in this country (RSPCA, 2010). Furthermore, it is apparent that there is a dire need to educate the public on matters surrounding how behavioural issues develop and how these can be prevented through effective obedience training (Braem & Mills, 2010).

An evaluation of existing behavioural assessment protocols in Australian rescue centres, including the confidence of rescue centre staff in making these assessments, was performed by Mornement *et al.* (2010). Data relating to assessment protocols were collected from 11 shelters and pounds across Australia, and the staff involved in executing said protocols underwent an interview questionnaire. While it was found that all assessment procedures had a common goal (to determine the safety of dogs), scoring systems varied vastly in method and the interpretation of final scores was often left undefined and ambiguous. Aggression, anxiety and disobedience were reported as the most prevalent problems, which is consistent with the most commonly reported reasons for relinquishment (Diesel *et al.*, 2010) and highlights the importance of training in the quest to improve communication between a dog and its owner (Braem & Mills, 2010).

The number of items tested per protocol ranged from six to 54, and staff identified issues with time availability, staff numbers and suitability of assessment areas. Only 77% of staff indicated that they had received training, which was mostly “on-the-job”, and the vast majority

rated themselves as being only “somewhat confident” or lower in making the assessments. The blatant lack of standardisation across current protocols means their efficacy is hard to assess. By formulating a blanket assessment protocol according to relevant scientific research, true behavioural issues (as opposed to those that can be improved upon through training) could be more accurately identified. This would not only decrease the number of dogs unnecessarily euthanased for behavioural problems, but would also simplify future analyses and make behavioural assessments in shelters more resource efficient.

Past studies have found a positive relationship between obedience training and reducing behavioural problems (Reisner, 1997) and, more recently, Braem & Mills (2010) investigated major determinants in dogs’ compliance with a given command. An initial field study, comprised of a diverse scope of dog breeds and ages, established two main points that affect dog compliance: the dog’s attention and the addition of extra verbal information before giving the command. This was then validated in an experimental context. It was found that a dog’s response is positively correlated with familiarity to the surroundings. Obedience decreased when the command was preceded by other information, which included the presence of a pause between saying the dog’s name to get its attention and then giving the command. These results illustrate the need to firmly establish the meaning of a command so that a dog’s ability to generalise verbal information is maximised in unfamiliar situations, when obedience is perhaps most vital. Diesel *et al.* (2010) found that 90.1% of respondents didn’t attend obedience classes with their dogs. This study shows that effective obedience training is paramount in reducing the incidence of behavioural issues, including moderate aggression (Reisner, 1997). This is a key issue, which needs to be addressed through public education in order to reduce the prevalence of dogs surrendered to animal shelters.

Conclusion

These three studies indicate that there is much room for improvement with regard to public education and dog behavioural assessment protocols. Irresponsible acquiring of dogs is a major factor in the development of behavioural issues, though obedience training has been shown to be effective in reducing the incidence of such behaviours and thus the likelihood of relinquishment. Regulations surrounding dog ownership and assessment in shelters must be re-evaluated on a scientific basis, which may well prove paramount in reducing the death toll in dog shelters and be a step forward for canine welfare in Australia.

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