

Dogs in Society Position Paper

Dog bite incidence and dog bite prevention

Companion animals bring many well-documented benefits to individuals and to society as a whole. Unfortunately, on some occasions, pets can become a nuisance by exhibiting socially unacceptable or dangerous behaviour. ACAC acknowledges that some dogs may present risks to society by exhibiting aggression towards humans. ACAC is concerned about the sensible management of dogs within the community and minimising the risks to public safety posed by dog bites.

Incidence

Australia has a canine population of about 4 million. The statistics currently available on dog attacks are incomplete and fragmented, since no comprehensive reporting system exists for dog attacks in Australia. However, it has been estimated that each year more than 100,000 Australians are attacked by dogs, causing injuries of varying degrees of severity.¹ The Accident and Emergency Departments of the nation's public hospitals treat an estimated 12,000 and 14,000 people for dog bite injuries.² Almost 1,400 of those have injuries that are serious enough to warrant hospitalisation. The majority of injuries inflicted by dogs are not serious, and the mortality rate is extremely low, but dog bites can cause severe physical and emotional damage.

Over 60% of dog bites occur either at home or in the home or backyard of a family member, a friend or a neighbour. Only about a third of reported dog bite incidents occur in public places.

Young children have the highest incidence of dog bite injuries requiring treatment. Around 60% of all serious bites occur in children under ten years of age, and many of their bites are to the head, face and neck.³ In contrast, adults are most likely to be bitten on the lower limbs and hands.

Media coverage of dog attacks tends to focus on incidents that occur in public places, yet the majority of dog attacks occur in the home environment, or in the home or backyard of a friend, neighbour or family member.

Cost of dog bites

The annual cost to the community for treating dog bite injuries in Australian public hospitals was calculated at over \$7 million in 2001.⁴ This figure does not include the many cases treated

¹ Ozanne-Smith, J, Ashby, K and Stathakis, V. (1998). Dog bites and injury prevention: A critical review and research agenda. Paper presented to the Animals, Community Health and Public Policy Symposium. The University of Sydney. November 1998.

² Bennett, P. and Righetti, J. (2001). The Delta Dog Safe™ Strategy, In *Proceedings of the 2001 Annual Urban Animal Management Conference*, Melbourne.

outside of the public hospital system, nor does it take into account the cost of the personal suffering and psychological damage associated with these attacks.

Breeds responsible

The involvement of certain breeds of dogs in attacks on humans has been highlighted by the media over recent years. In the majority of dog attacks, the breed of dog responsible is not able to be accurately determined. When dog bites can be attributed to a particular breed, the breeds represented tend to reflect their relative popularity in the community.⁵ Nearly half the dogs in Australia are crossbreeds, which do not demonstrate a consistent breed type.

Dog bite prevention strategies

ACAC believes that the harm caused by dog bites can be minimised, and supports strategies that aim to achieve a measurable reduction in the incidence of dog bites in the home and in public places.

Legislation and punitive measures that target dangerous and stray dogs, and place controls on dogs in public areas have proven to be only marginally effective in addressing this problem.⁵ Dog bites are often a human problem, associated with inappropriate selection of dogs, ignorance of dog care and management and inappropriate behaviour around dogs. Establishing an environment where dogs are carefully selected, properly cared for, socialised and trained, and supervised around children, is more likely reduce the incidence of dog attacks on humans.

ACAC supports a proactive environmental health strategy that includes education campaigns directed at dog owners, children and the wider community. The focus of these education campaigns should be on:

- developing increased awareness of dog management and care;
- community understanding of dog behaviour;
- safe and sensible human behaviour in the presence of dogs, both in the home and in public places, and
- owner responsibility.

Education programs have been effective in changing the ways humans relate to dogs. A public education program trialled in Australia, teaching children to interact with dogs in a safe and sensible manner, has been scientifically proven to effectively modify children's behaviour around dogs.⁶

Preventing behavioural problems in dogs is another important means of reducing the incidence of dog attacks. ACAC supports the development of programs that assist the public with selection of

³ Ashby, K. (2001). Establishing the case! The facts of dog bite - Victorian public hospital injury surveillance, In *Proceedings of the 2001 Annual Urban Animal Management Conference*, Melbourne.

⁴ Bennett, P. and Righetti, J. (2001). The Delta Dog Safe™ Strategy, In *Proceedings of the 2001 Annual Urban Animal Management Conference*, Melbourne.

⁵ Seksel, K. (2002). Report to the NSW Department of Local Government on breed specific legislation issues relating to the control of dangerous dogs.

⁶ Chapman, S., Comwall, J., Righetti, J. and Sung, L. (2000). Preventing dog bites in children: randomised controlled trial of an educational intervention. *British Medical Journal*, **320**, 1512-1513.

suitable dogs, and teach dog training and socialisation techniques. For more information on dog bite prevention programs operating in Australia, see Appendix 1.

ACAC also supports the development of reasonable, enforceable legislation to establish a well-defined method for dealing with dogs proven to be dangerous, and, impose penalties on irresponsible owners commensurate with the seriousness of breaches. ACAC believes that dogs should be classified as dangerous on an individual basis, based on the individual dog's behaviour not its breed or appearance. For more details refer to the ACAC position statement "Legislation to prevent dog attacks".