

Dogs in Society Position Paper

Public education strategies for dog bite prevention

Background

Companion animals bring many positive psychological, social and health benefits to individual pet owners and the community at large. 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.

Australia has a canine population of about 4 million. It has been estimated that each year more than 100,000 Australians are attacked by dogs, causing injuries of varying degrees of severity. The Accident and Emergency Departments of the nation's public hospitals treat between 12,000 and 14,000 people for dog bite injuries and 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. Young children have the highest incidence of dog bite injuries requiring treatment. 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.

Education strategies

ACAC is concerned about minimising the risks to public safety posed by dangerous dogs, and supports measures that aim to achieve a measurable reduction in the incidence of dog bites in local communities. 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.

The dangerous dog problem is also a human problem, often associated with inappropriate selection of dogs, ignorance of dog care and management, lack of training and socialisation of dogs, and inadequate supervision of children around dogs. A more responsible approach to dog ownership and a better understanding of dog behaviour by dog owners and non-owners alike, are the cornerstones of dog bite prevention, both in the home and in public places.

Public education strategies are essential to establishing an environment where dogs are carefully selected, properly cared for, supervised around children, socialised and trained. ACAC believes that education programs that modify human behaviour around dogs and teach responsible dog ownership should be implemented by State and Local Government authorities, in conjunction with regulatory measures for stray and dangerous dogs.

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;
- teaching safe and sensible human behaviour in the presence of dogs;
- owner responsibility, and
- compliance with legislation and regulations concerning dog ownership.