

**RSPCA PAPER
CONCERNING TAIL DOCKING OF DOGS**

THE ENVIRONMENT, PLANNING AND COUNTRYSIDE COMMITTEE.

WALES

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Introduction

The RSPCA totally opposes the tail docking of dogs, except for genuine therapeutic reasons. By “genuine therapeutic reasons” the Society is referring to surgical procedures regarded as necessary by a veterinary surgeon. An example of this may be amputation of the tail after a severe crushing injury following a road traffic accident.

The Society believes that tail docking for either cosmetic or prophylactic purposes is both cruel and unnecessary.

The Procedure

Puppies are generally docked between 3 and 5 days of age. No anaesthesia is used in the majority of cases. Administration of anaesthesia to puppies has its own risks including cardiovascular respiratory depression and possibly death. Manual restraint is usually all that is used. A blade or scissors are then used to chop through the tail and sutures are then placed to prevent bleeding and aid healing.

Arguments for a total ban on tail docking

1. Pain and suffering

There is significant pain and suffering caused when docking is performed without anaesthesia. Muscles, tendons, 4 to 7 pairs of nerves, bone and cartilage are all severed. There is much scientific evidence to support the fact that acute pain is experienced by puppies¹. There is some scientific evidence that this pain may even be more severe than that suffered by an adult dog. Pain must be inferred on the basis of indirect measures because puppies can't tell us they are in pain verbally. Neuroma formation in puppies is documented and could point to more prolonged chronic pain also being experienced².

2. Possibility of complications

¹ Bennett PC & Perini E “Tail Docking in Dogs: A Review of the Issues” *Aust Vet Journal*2003; 81:208-218

² Bennett PC & Perini E “Tail Docking in Dogs: A Review of the Issues” *Aust Vet Journal*2003; 81:208-218

There is a real possibility of future complications related directly to the docking of dog's tails eg an increased incidence of perineal hernia in dogs and an increased incidence of USMI (urinary incontinence) in bitches. These complications require further investigation but there is early evidence which cannot be discounted without large scale properly controlled studies³.

3. **Are there any significant benefits derived from amputating a puppy's tail?**

We must balance the loss of the animal's tail against any future possible benefits. There is currently no evidence of any benefit from tail docking. Prophylactic docking is a surgical procedure to prevent a perceived possibility of injury at some point in the future which may or may not occur. Evidence shows that tail injury is not common the dog⁴. Tail injury in the cat is more common than in the dog and yet there is no prophylactic tail docking in this species. By the same token ears, toes and paws also sustain injuries but are not routinely removed.

It is highly likely with modern medicine that most injuries that are sustained to the tail by working, or other dogs, will be treatable without amputation.

The argument is akin to the now discontinued practice of removing all children's tonsils in order to avoid a possible bout of tonsillitis in the future.

4. **Are working dogs any more prone to injury?**

³ Wansbrough RK. "Cosmetic Tail Docking of Dogs" *Aust Vet Journal* 1996; 74:59-63; AdamsWM, DiBartola SP. "Radiographic and Clinical Features of Pelvic Bladder in the Dog" *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 1983; 182: 1212-1217; Holt PE & Thrushfield MV. "Association in bitches between breed, size, neutering and docking, and acquired urinary incontinence due to Incompetence of the Urethral Sphincter Mechanism" *Vet Record* 1993; 133:177-180

⁴ Morton D "Docking of Dogs: Practical and Ethical Aspects" *Vet Record* 1992;131:301-306; Darke PGG, Thrushfield MV & Aitken CGG. "Association Between Tail Injuries and Docking in Dogs" *Vet Record* 1985; 116:409

There is currently no scientific evidence that working dogs suffer an increased occurrence of tail injuries or that any tail injuries that they do sustain are of increased severity compared to pet dogs⁵.

5. The need for a tail

Dogs use their tails naturally during movement for balance and steering. They also use their tails for communication with other dogs and with humans. Although it is possible that dogs develop compensatory mechanisms to deal with these changes to their natural behaviour, why should there be a need to? Nature provided a tail, why remove it unnecessarily?

Conclusion

Cosmetic and therapeutic docking cannot be justified. The pain caused and the possibility of complications or adverse effects, provide sufficient reasons for an outright ban on the procedure. The purported benefits of docking cannot be proven and in light of the pain and suffering caused, cannot be used to justify the procedure. In assessing the balance of evidence it is better to abstain from the procedure for solid welfare reasons than to continue it on the basis of perceived unproved benefits that are unlikely to exist in reality.

⁵ Morton D “Docking of Dogs: Practical and Ethical Aspects” *Vet Record* 1992;131:301-306; Darke PGG, Thrushfield MV & Aitken CGG. “Association Between Tail Injuries and Docking in Dogs” *Vet Record* 1985; 116:409