Non-therapeutic tail docking in dogs

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Introduction

Non-therapeutic tail docking is the amputation of a dog’s tail at varying lengths to suit the recommendations of a breed standard (the breed standard is a document that describes what a particular breed of dog should look like). Docking involves the amputation of the puppy’s tail with scissors or a scalpel. Sometimes rubber bands are used, although this method has never been advocated by veterinarians as it causes necrosis (death) of the tissue over several days or weeks, accompanied by high levels of pain and is considered to be cruel. When a scalpel is used, the cut goes through many highly sensitive nerves in the skin, cartilage and bone. This procedure is usually performed without any anaesthetic, or with a local anaesthetic, at three to five days of age. A small number of dogs are born naturally without a tail (1).

In the past, it was common for puppies of certain breeds to routinely have their tails docked. The procedure was usually performed either by veterinarians (preferably) or by breeders themselves. On 1 June 2008, the South African Veterinary Council (a statutory body of control of the veterinary professions) decided that it would no longer condone the routine docking of puppies’ tail and pronounced the procedure unethical for veterinarians to perform. Since then it has been performed mostly by the dog breeders although many breeders have chosen to abandon tail docking and most of the breed standards have been amended to accept dogs with intact (long) tails.

Veterinarians are allowed to amputate dogs’ tails only for valid therapeutic reasons e.g. a chronic recurring injury or cancer.
Tail docking as a form of maiming

The Concise Oxford English Dictionary (2008), defines “maim” as follows: “wound or injure (someone) so that part of the body is permanently damaged”. The Free Dictionary (<www.freedictionary.com>) provides the following definition: “to injure, disable, or disfigure, usually by depriving of the use of a limb or other part of the body”.

Since the removal of the tail of a puppy results in permanent loss of (i.e. damage to) a body part, the procedure of removing a healthy tail can be considered a form of maiming.

Routine tail docking of young dogs is unacceptable because

1. it causes unnecessary pain and stress (even if performed with local anaesthesia), and
2. it maims the dog, making it impossible for it to use its tail for balance and communication.

Tail docking (maiming) and pain

Neonatal puppies, even at a few days of age, have a fully developed nervous system and a well-developed sense of pain. In fact, they are considered to be more sensitive to pain than juvenile and adult animals (2), (3), in line with similar findings in humans. The pain associated with the actual procedure is relevant (4), as it involves cutting through a joint and not just skin as well as the potential complications afterwards including bleeding, infection and even the death of the puppy. There can also be complications later in life such as amputation neuroma formation (a very painful condition) (5) and damage to the anal sphincters resulting in faecal incontinence.
Tail docking (maiming) and function of the tail

Dogs use their tail functionally mostly for communication and for balance.

Body language i.e. visual communication is the most important way in which dogs communicate (6), (7). Various parts of the body are used, including the tail, ears, facial expression, body posture and eye contact. The height of the tail and its movement indicate what the dog is thinking and what its intentions are. A friendly approach is signified by wild wagging, above or below or the topline, an aggressive approach is evident when the tail is held high and just the tip is wagging. A fearful dog will hold its tail between its legs. These attributes are difficult if not impossible to observe in a dog with a docked tail. This may lead to misunderstandings as the absence of the tail means that dogs are unable to read each other’s signals correctly. It could result in unnecessary aggression between dogs and resultant injury. People also may not be able to differentiate different tail movements where there is only a short stump and inadvertently approach a dog that is signaling its aggressive intent. This could result in the dog biting the person who is perceived as being a threat. Over time, dogs with docked tails may learn that people or other dogs are not trustworthy and they become more aggressive as a result. Not only does this have a direct negative influence on the dog’s quality of life, but it also poses a health risk to people and animals the dog may come in contact with.

The tail is anatomically part of the spinal column. It contains nervous tissue (the spinal cord and nerves), bone (tail vertebrae), cartilage, muscles, tendons and blood vessels. The tail helps stabilise the animal during movement as it moves in the opposite direction during loss of balance or a misstep and thus prevents falling. The absence of a tail therefore may lead to subsequent injury.

Weighing up the pros and cons

Non-therapeutic tail docking does not provide any benefit to puppies or adult dogs. Traditionally, some breeders considered a docked tail necessary to fulfill the
working (hunting) functions of the dog. Today many working breeds are kept as house pets and only a small percentage are used for field work, which is a recreational activity for people and not an essential function. If dogs of breeds that are customarily docked are left with intact tails, they are not more likely to get tail injuries than dogs of other breeds. A study in the UK (Diesel et al, 2010) showed that the risk for tail injuries in dogs with intact tails is only 0.23% i.e. a very low risk, and most of these injuries are as a result of household injuries, not when out hunting (8).

If a procedure that causes pain and problems with communication, negatively affects movement and balance, has no immediate or future benefit for the animal and may lead to life-threatening complications, it is unnecessary and should not be performed (1).

References
