

ONE HEALTH

The complex issue of dog bites

CAROLINE Bower's recent letter (*VR*, October 18, 2014, vol 175, p 385) highlighted the issue of dog bites. Mrs Bower makes some valid points and many share her concerns. An important consideration in this matter is the legislation that exists to protect the public from dog attacks and promote responsible dog ownership.

The 1991 Dangerous Dogs Act was passed in a very short space of time in response to a small number of high-profile dog attacks on vulnerable individuals, placing restrictions on four particular breeds of dog considered to be 'dangerous'. The statute appeared following widespread media coverage of these events and has been described by many as a kneejerk response from Whitehall (Baldwin and others 2000).

Breed-specific legislation has been criticised for failing to address that a dog's breed is just one of many factors that influence the likelihood of it displaying aggression towards people. Dog bites are not notifiable and not all injured parties seek medical treatment. Accurate data on the occurrence of dog bite injuries in people is therefore lacking. Identification of breed or type is subjective and often inaccurate (Sacks and others 2000). A comparative study of dog bite presentations in people at an urban emergency department in the UK found no significant decrease in dog-inflicted injury after introduction of the Dangerous Dogs Act (Klassen and other 1996).

A more rational approach towards public safety around dogs is exemplified by predicting an animal's likelihood of future aggression based on its previous behaviour. A dangerous dog ordinance passed in Multnomah county in Oregon, USA, in 1986, preceded a significant reduction in aggravated incidences of aggression by dogs that had been classed as dangerous, based on previous behaviour (Oswald 1991).

Veterinarians may be asked to examine dogs suspected of injuring people (or other species) in the resolution of legal disputes. In order to assist effectively, a forensic approach is required and this may involve collection of evidence, preparation of a report and giving expert witness testimony in court.

Bite mark analysis is an emerging discipline in the field of veterinary forensic science (Bailey 2013). Veterinarians are not permitted to examine people so a multidisciplinary approach is necessary. Bite marks have certain measurable characteristics. Images of the injury may be compared with suitably scaled representations of the dentition of the suspected biter (useful guidelines are provided by the American Board of Forensic

Odontology at www.abfo.org/resources/id-bitemark-guidelines). Techniques that analyse bite marks in this manner may allow a conclusion to be drawn regarding the species that inflicted the injury or rule out a particular putative biter.

Analysis of DNA evidence collected from the mouth and claws of the suspected biter and from the victim may also demonstrate reciprocal transfer of material between the two.

Multiple forms of evidence (if they point to a similar conclusion) are highly likely to strengthen the case for a prosecution. For this reason, all steps must be documented in contemporaneous notes and photographs, with the suspect clearly identified. Evidence collected must be clearly labelled, identified and logged. Preserving the chain of custody will demonstrate that the evidence collected is that which is eventually presented to the court. If these steps are not observed fastidiously the case is likely to be challenged in court.

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doi: 10.1136/vr.g6752

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Veterinary Record 2014 175: 490
doi: 10.1136/vr.g6752

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