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❑ **Figure 1:** Although some breeds may have a reputation for being aggressive in many cases it is unfounded (images courtesy of Kerry Brennan)



Law, ethics and professional practice – Part 1: euthanasia of healthy, but aggressive, dogs

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ABSTRACT: The Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 is in place to protect the public from aggressive dogs. Many dogs are euthanased as a result of vicious attacks on animals and people, especially children. The first article in this three-part series will focus on why dogs bite and the consequences of aggressive tendencies – for the dog, dog owner, veterinary surgeon and the veterinary nurse. The veterinary nurse has a duty of care ethically and professionally, but not every case is 'black and white'. So what would you do if you disagreed with the decision to euthanase a healthy, but potentially aggressive, dog?

For many years, dogs have been 'man's best friend', loyal companion and one of our society's favourite pets. People bond with their pets psychologically and socially. Despite this, there is anecdotal evidence for an apparent increase in dog attacks; not only on other animals but also on people too, especially children.

As a result of this, an increasing number of dogs are abandoned or euthanased, ultimately causing problems in animal welfare.¹

Dog attacks are dependent on a number of factors – not least the breed of dog – but also on the actions or inactions of the dog owner. The Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 is in place to protect the public from aggressive dogs and it makes it a criminal offence to own or be in charge of an aggressive dog.

With this Act in force, why are dog attacks on the increase and what needs to be done to protect the public and prevent healthy – but antisocial – dogs being euthanased? It is all too easy to blame the animal – yet who is truly at fault, human or canine!

Why do dogs bite?

Aggression is the result of millions of years of evolution which saw the wild dog forming hunting packs in order to bring down game. It is still an instinct; although nowadays it is considered to be a behaviour that can be coaxed or trained out of the modern dog breeds.²

Why then is there an apparent cultural change in our society which appears to view the pet dog as dangerous and likely to launch a vicious, often unprovoked, assault on children, resulting in a subsequent increase in the numbers of dogs that are euthanased or re-homed as a result?³

Some dogs that bite unexpectedly have never shown aggressive tendencies before, but they may have underlying medical problems affecting their behaviour. A recent study showed that, in the study group, half of the dogs that had bitten children for the first time had a medical problem, mainly related to their skin or skeleton.⁴

Children are more at risk of being attacked because they may send confusing signals to dogs by moving quickly and because they are smaller in size – both behaviours which are exhibited by prey species and which, therefore, are likely to induce a powerful response in the dog.

Young children are also more likely to provoke dogs by pulling their hair or tail. Furthermore, they can make a dog anxious by being boisterous and unpredictable.⁴

Public education

Attacks involving children often result in serious injuries and even death; therefore, we need to educate people about dog behaviour and the effects of our behaviour on theirs. Educating the public, especially children, about dog behaviour could prevent a significant number of injuries.

Most dogs do not naturally tend to be aggressive and they do not bite without reason; the fact that they do demonstrates a failure in communication and in our society.⁵

In 2006, one study reported that 67 out of 100 investigated child-bite incidents could have been prevented with owner education about dog behaviour.⁶ Another study, in 2009, suggested that owners who attempted their own behaviour-modifying training techniques made the situation worse, resulting in serious aggression which could be owner-directed.⁷

The risk of dominance-based training and confrontational methods – such as hitting kicking or growling at the dog, alpha roll and staring – made the dogs respond aggressively. These methods, that had been applied prior to a behaviour consultation, were associated with aggressive responses in many of the cases. Therefore, it would seem reasonable to assume that if people behave aggressively, it is highly likely that their dogs will respond in a similar manner.

“The VN has a duty to act as an advocate, where appropriate. So what would your response be if you disagreed with the course of action, because the dog is a healthy animal with a less than clear history of aggressive behaviour?”

Another study established that owners were more likely to choose euthanasia because of dominant aggression if their pet was a large breed dog compared to smaller breeds, because of the risk of the larger dog inflicting greater damage.⁸ However, if euthanasia is delayed after an injury, the owners may be influenced by the dog's subsequent good behaviour, thus allowing the problem to be put to the back of their minds.³

Consequences of aggressive behaviour

The Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 was introduced because of the increase in aggressive breeds of dog in the UK. Section Three of the Act applies to every dog in England and Wales that is showing aggressive tendencies. This means that it is a criminal offence to own, or be in charge of, a dog that is dangerously out of control in a public place.

The maximum penalty is a two-year imprisonment, or a fine, or both. If a dog is not kept under control it could be destroyed, and a ban enforced to stop the owner keeping dogs in the future. It is likely that owners of an aggressive dog will be ordered to keep their dog muzzled when in public.

The police and the local authority should be contacted concerning suspected dangerous or banned breed dogs, where the dog is causing a nuisance or appears to be a stray.


Euthanasia

According to the RCVS *Guide to Professional Conduct for Veterinary Surgeons*, if asked by the Courts to destroy a dog, unless there is a genuine threat to human safety, the veterinary surgeon (VS) should request a written and a signed order from the statutory authorities.

If the owner requests euthanasia because of their dog's proven aggressive tendencies, the VS must respect the owner's wishes and the circumstances.

Refusing such a request could distress the owner further and put others at risk of an attack by that dog.

Veterinary nurses (VN) also have responsibilities to their patients, clients, general public, colleagues and the law. They must adhere to the RCVS *Guide to Professional Conduct for RVNs*. The VS will normally ask the VN to assist with euthanasia, but in some cases the circumstances may not be all they appear to be.

The VN has a duty to act as an advocate, where appropriate. So what would your response be if you disagreed with the course of action, because the dog is a healthy animal with a less than clear history of aggressive behaviour? 

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