College of Veterinarians of British Columbia

Canine Devocalization- Background Information

Non-therapeutic canine ventriculocordectomy (devocalization, debarking) refers to full or partial surgical resection of the vocal cords to reduce the volume and/or pitch of a dog's bark.[1,2,3]

This background document describes the current regulatory landscape and positions of major North American veterinary organizations regarding devocalization, and lists published reasons that have been given for performing the procedure as well as published concerns and complications.

Regulatory positions

Non-therapeutic ventriculocordectomy is banned for welfare reasons in multiple countries and regions.[4] In Canada, the procedure is banned in Nova Scotia, Alberta, and New Brunswick while Quebec is in the process of enacting a ban.[5,6,7,8] The procedure is banned in the UK, EU, and Saudi Arabia, as well as several US states.[2,9,10,11] In Australia and New Zealand, the procedure is legal only in narrow circumstances (as a last resort after all other interventions have been attempted).[12,13]

The procedure remains legal in the rest of Canada and most US states, as well as South Africa, China, Singapore, and other countries where it has not specifically been banned.[2,14]

Positions of major North American veterinary organizations

The Canadian Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA) and American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA) oppose non-therapeutic ventriculocordectomy.[1,15] VCA Canada prohibits the procedure across their hospital system.[16] The American Veterinary Medical Association (policy currently under review) supports the procedure only as a last resort when the alternative is euthanasia.[17]

Rationale for performing the procedure

- It may be necessary to prevent relinquishment or euthanasia when management and behavioural interventions are ineffective*[2,18]
- Decreasing barking may improve the acoustic environment for people and animals[2]
- It may assist with compliance with noise bylaws and/or prevent landlord action (eviction)[2, 18]

* A recent study analyzing a decade of canine surrender data for 34 animal shelters in BC found that only 0.036% (115/31,3690) of owner surrendered dogs had barking listed as the reason.[19]

Concerns and complications described in published literature

- Barking is a normal behaviour in dogs and is used to communicate with other animals and humans[1,2,4]
- Ventriculocordectomy does not address the underlying reason(s) for the barking, which may include anxiety, boredom, social facilitation, and clinical behaviour problems[1,2,4,18,20]
- Effective management and treatment of undesirable barking should identify and address the underlying cause; if this is not done, welfare may be compromised and other undesirable alternative behaviours may occur[1,2,18,20]
- Ventriculocordectomy can be associated with short- and long-term complications including:[1,2,3]
    - Anesthetic complications
    - Post-operative pain, hemorrhage, swelling, infection, coughing, gagging, and aspiration pneumonia
    - Scarring resulting in exercise intolerance, dyspnea, stridor, and heat/exercise intolerance
- It may be ineffective at eliminating vocalization; a near-normal bark can resume after surgery[1,2,3]

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