Aggression Between Dogs: what can the vet do to solve the problem?

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Dog related injuries can have costly outcomes: physical injury, psychological damage and financial costs, including NHS and veterinary bills. There may be court proceedings and an owner may acquire a criminal record due to their dog’s behaviour.

Human injuries are the main focus of attention: DEFRA (2012) estimated 210,000 “attacks” on people each year in England. Dog-dog aggression is common, but given less attention. Casey and others’ (2012) survey, summarised on Page XX in this edition, indicated that 22% of 3897 owners have dogs displaying “aggressive” behaviours (barking, lunging, growing or biting) towards unfamiliar dogs. Such behaviour alone may be sufficient cause for a criminal case under the Dangerous Dogs Act, 1991, with potential consequences which may include the implementation of control orders, the accused dog may be seized and destroyed and a criminal record for the owner. Yet, Casey and colleagues found that “[weak] concordance between dog and human-directed aggression suggested most dogs were not showing aggression in multiple contexts”. This supports the view of many who work with dogs that inter-dog aggression is not indicative of dog-human aggression.

People tend to seek simple answers to complex problems, legislation intended to control dog ‘dangerousness’ is one example. The lack of evidence for ‘dangerous breeds’ (e.g. Klassen and others 1996; Ott and others 2008) has led Belgium, the Netherlands and Italy to change to a ‘deed not breed’ approach (De Keuster and others 2006; Cornelissen and Hopster 2010).

Casey and others (2012) provide further support: whilst finding that terriers and pastoral breeds were more frequently reported as showing inter-dog aggressive behaviour, compared to the crossbreed sample, this was only one of many factors investigated which, together, only accounted for less than 15% of the overall variance in the data. The issue is complex and cannot be explained by single variables such as breed, type of owner, training method. Casey and colleagues, along with previous researchers (e.g. Arhant and others, 2010) remind us that aggressive behaviour is multi-factorial and that any dog can bite.

Veterinarians have ethical and legal obligations to assist owners by providing appropriate advice. There are three pre-requisites for this to occur:

1. A good understanding of what aggressive behaviour is and how it may be identified.
2. Access to competent, skilled and knowledgeable sources of prophylactic and remedial help, who can educate both owner and dog, based on a clear understanding of how behaviour develops and appropriate action for that dog-owner situation.
3. Providing owners with opportunities to recognise that there may be a problem, or potential problem, and providing supportive feedback and information about available help, rather than responding with unfounded adages, such as ‘he’s just a typical Jack Russell Terrier’ which may imply nothing that can be done.

Aggressive behaviour is frequently mis-understood, resulting in inappropriate responses (McBride 2010a). One needs to investigate the pre-disposing, initiating and maintaining factors in each individual case (Horowitz and Mills 2009).

The most common triggers for aggressive behaviour are: fear – either of loss of resources or harm to self or significant other; and frustration - not being able to obtain resources; or not being able to remove a potential threat. The emotions reinforcing this behaviour are relief from fear and pleasure and/or relief from frustration. Other behaviours often perceived as aggressive (e.g. barking, lunging, growling and/or biting) include predatory behaviour, play, and attack behaviour taught through positive reinforcement and all associated with pleasure (Jones-Baade and McBride 1999).

Under the Animal Welfare Act (2006) owners have a duty of care to enable their dog to exhibit normal behaviour and to protect it from suffering, including feeling fearful or being injured in an aggressive dog-dog incident. Whilst not every interaction between individuals, human or dog, is going to be positive, appropriate breeding, socialisation, training and management can help prevent fearful behaviour developing, thus reducing the likelihood of difficult encounters escalating (McCune and others 1995). Likewise aggressive behaviour rooted in frustration can have many causes, including insufficient physical and mental stimulation (e.g. insufficient training or off lead exercise or opportunities for appropriate play with other dogs).

Professionals need a knowledgeable, responsible attitude to advising owners throughout the dog’s lifecycle. Breeders need to consider both health and temperament in breeding, for pedigree and non-pedigree animals (CAWC 2006). All suppliers should consider the owner’s lifestyle and its suitability for the type of dog considered. Pre-purchase advice could be part of veterinary services, what may be suitable at one life stage, may not be appropriate at another; changes may reflect an owner’s health, work, financial or family situation. For example, the collie or Jack Russell might be appropriate for an energetic person with lots of time, for others, a less demanding breed or adopting an older dog may be a more suitable choice (McBride 2005).

Veterinarians are in a prime position to provide sources of prophylactic advice. Understanding that training and socialisation is necessary, not just for puppies, but needs to be continued throughout development to behavioural adulthood is an important message to get across. Most dogs are relinquished due to behaviour problems developing during adolescence and young adulthood (Salman and others 1998), which might have been prevented had owners had appropriate advice during these difficult developmental stages. It is incumbent on the veterinarian to ensure owners are directed to competent co-professionals who use positive reinforcement techniques, teach owners about dog behaviour (Shephed 2007) and the behavioural management requirements of their individual animal (McBride 2010b; ABTC n.d.)

Finally, veterinarians need to be aware that behaviour problems can arise throughout life. Even well socialised and trained dogs may become fearful and, for example, show inter-dog aggression due to traumatic experience, pain or other reasons. It is imperative that veterinarians take the time, during routine consultations, to ask pertinent questions about a dog’s behaviour and thus help owners recognise potential or current issues as early as possible and be directed to appropriate sources of help (Roshier and McBride 2012).

As the paper by Casey and others (2012) and others before indicate, animal behaviour is complex and multifactorial in its development. When behaviour is problematical it has serious ramifications for all concerned. An inter-disciplinary, inter-professional approach needs to be taken if we are to be the dog’s best friend.

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