



FVE POSITION ON DANGEROUS DOGS

Background

Over the last few decades the ownership of dogs primarily as companion animals has increased in the urban population, with benefits for the individual and the community. But, inevitably, it has also had some drawbacks.

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Dog bite injuries have recently received increased publicity. Serious incidents involving dangerous dogs in several Member States have sparked fierce reactions and have led some Member States to call for a Community initiative to address this problem. This should however be seen in the context that the majority of dogs never bite anyone.

Dog bite injuries may be caused by various factors such as uncontrolled playing behaviour, lack of training, fear, pain, inappropriate offensive or defensive reactions. Sometimes dogs are also used as a weapon by criminals or are kept for fighting purposes.

To attempt to control these negative aspects of the dog-human interaction different countries have implemented various legislative measures. These measures can be divided into two categories. The first addressing the behaviour of the individual dog and the second addressing the behaviour of certain breeds or breed types.

Current situation

- Although some countries have adopted breed-specific measures, there is no scientific or statistic evidence to suggest that these effectively reduce the frequency or severity of injuries to people.
- To date, no scientific criteria have been identified by which it can be determined that a dog is dangerous by simply describing its racial or other physical parameters.
- Breed-specific legislation has been shown to be difficult to apply due to the problem of defining breeds and breed types. This has been a major source of controversy.
- Breed-specific legislation engenders a false and dangerous perception that breeds not included will not show aggression. Aggression is a normal behaviour and can be shown by any dog of any breed, type or mixed breeding.
- Breed-specific legislation does not discriminate between individual members of a breed, many of which may not be predisposed to aggressive behaviour. Rather, all dogs of a specific breed, whatever their behaviour, are subject to the same restrictions.

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Way Forward

FVE strongly believes that the most effective means of preventing and controlling aggression is to direct measures at the individual dog and its owner.

In particular, since part of the problem originates from the criminal use of dogs by well known individuals, measures to control this should be taken directly towards them.

However because of the lack of reliable scientific data, it is proposed that further research is conducted with the aim of developing tools which will allow a proper risk analysis of the aggressive behaviour of individual dogs.

a) Education

- Education of owners and of dogs will lead to a more responsible attitude to ownership and decrease the risk to the public. There is a variety of opinion relating to the education of dogs and owners and this area requires further development.

b) Identification

- Effective measures will require mandatory identification of all dogs in the European Community. This is the only way to link an individual dog involved in an aggressive incident with the person legally responsible for that animal, to collect and exchange data and to do epidemiological and statistical research.
- A central database in every EU member state to collect data on dogs involved in aggressive incidents will also be required.

c) Research programmes

- Preliminary results in the fields of behaviour, genetics, neuro-psychology and physiology suggest that scientific protocols can be developed to address the issues of breeding, individual assessment and education.
- Comprehensive surveys on dog bites are required both to provide background information and to allow for the monitoring of the efficacy of any control measures.

d) Testing programmes

- There is some evidence that aggressive behaviour has an inherited component. Thus it is important to determine the genes involved and to develop controlled and responsible breeding programmes, supported by simple testing procedures.
- Behaviour is also influenced by the environment, in which the animal develops and lives. Thus, the testing of the individual dog's predisposition to show aggression can allow owners to take appropriate steps to prevent any incidents. Such testing procedures are still in their infancy and require further development. Existing procedures, though scientifically validated, are to be extended so that it becomes feasible to apply them on a large scale.

Recommendations

FVE urges the European Commission and Member States to:

1. Promote education and training of dogs, dog owners and dog professionals such as veterinarians and trainers.
2. Postpone the adoption of further breed-specific legislation until a proper risk analysis has been carried out.
3. Introduce a mandatory identification for all dogs, which is compatible across the European Union.
4. Encourage research, through the 5th Framework Research Program for example, in such fields as:
 - dog behaviour and its genetical, neuro-physiological and ethological background,
 - dog bites monitoring,
 - education and training of dogs, dog owners and dog professionals such as veterinarians and trainers.