

Council of Docked Breeds Brief to MP's on Tail Docking

Reasons for docking

- There are 4 main reasons why dogs are docked:
 1. **Prophylactic docking** - to prevent tail injuries in both working dogs & other breeds which are predisposed to tail damage
 2. **Docking for hygiene** – to protect certain breeds predisposed to perineal fouling, for similar reasons as docking sheep
 3. **To remedy broken tails** - In certain breeds i.e. Old English Sheepdogs and King Charles Spaniels, 85% of the puppies in large litters are born with broken tails.
 4. **And to maintain** long established breed standards which otherwise would result in many breeds disappearing.

Position of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee and the Government

In the Regulatory Impact Assessment which accompanies the Bill, it is stated at Paragraph 15: ""Sincere views were held by those who both support and oppose a ban on cosmetic docking and our preference is that there should continue to be freedom of choice." Therefore **the Government, after three and a half years of consultation and deliberation, has agreed that veterinary surgeons should continue to be entitled to exercise their own clinical judgement over docking on a case by case basis within guidance laid down by the profession.**

- The CDB welcomed the Government's position on the docking of tails.

Animal Welfare Bill and Tail Docking

- **Clause 5 (Mutilation)** of the Animal Welfare Bill **prohibits the mutilation** (referred to as a "prohibited procedure") of any protected animal unless the procedure has been exempted from the general prohibition by regulations.
- **There must be included an exemption for the prophylactic docking of dogs as has been agreed in principle by DEFRA after three and a half years of Consultations and deliberation.**

What is Tail Docking?

- **Docking is the shortening of the tail.** The procedure is undertaken both in the case of farm animals and in dogs.
- Docking, within the meaning of the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966, is the shortening of the tail by surgical means before a puppy's eyes are open.
- **Docking can involve a surgical excision, electrocautery, or the placing of a specialised rubber band at the required length on the tail.** The blood supply to the end of the tail is thus constricted, and the end of the tail comes away within about three days. Most vets used to cut the tail with surgical scissors but are now more likely to use the banding or electrocautery method.
- The earlier a puppy is docked the better, and **many vets like to carry out the procedure before 3 days of age.** However, in some small breeds it can be left until the pups have reached 5 days of age.
- **Docking is a humane procedure and one that prevents far more distress than it causes.** Like neutering, it is a practical animal management technique which should remain available to dog breeders and owners.

Why is prophylactic docking carried out?

- The object of the procedure is **to prevent future tail damage in many breeds which if left with full tails, are susceptible to severe tail damage.** It is also carried out to prevent perineal fouling, particularly in long-coated breeds.
- Many working gundog breeds, such as Springer spaniels, search for game through heavy vegetation and thick brambles. **If left undocked, the repetitive beating of the tail against brushwood, brambles, game cover crops or other undergrowth can cause injury** ranging from the stripping of hair from the skin, inflammation, lesions and bleeding, to broken tails.
- Many other breeds, such as Boxers and Dobermanns are predisposed to damaging their tails in and around the home due to the fact that their tails have very little protection and with an excitable “thrashing” movement of the tail when they get excited. **If left undocked, the repetitive beating of the tail against anything sharp has proven to cause injury** ranging from the stripping of hair from the skin, inflammation, lesions and bleeding, to broken tails. Due to the enthusiastic tail action of these breeds, blood is often distributed widely across the dog's flanks and hindquarters. This is distressing for all concerned.
- **In these cases, therapeutic amputation is the only practical cure.** This is a much larger operation in an adult dog, **involving general anaesthetic with all its attendant risks.** Healing can be difficult and protracted with post-operative discomfort and irritation. Phantom limb syndrome can result in dogs whose tails have been amputated later on in life.

It is important to note that not all dogs are docked. The need to dock depends on the structure and nature of the tail, and the tail action, together with the type of work in which a dog is normally employed. Thus Labradors, which have a thick tail, heavily protected by a double coat of dense hair and a relatively low, slow tail action, are not docked. Boxers which have a thin tail, lightly covered with fine hair and a high, fast and enthusiastic tail action, are docked. English pointers, which range widely over low growing heather moorland, are not docked. German pointers, which are used to hunt and flush game in tall dense cover, are docked.

Tail docking was banned in Sweden in 1989 and this led to a massive increase in tail injuries amongst previously docked breeds. Of the 50 undocked Pointer litters registered that year with the Swedish Kennel Club, 38% of dogs suffered tail injury before 18 months of age. In 1991, the number of individuals with tail injuries had increased to 51% of the group. (Figures from Swedish German Pointer Club)

Who can carry out the procedure?

- Prior to 1st July 1993 docking was mostly carried out by experienced dog breeders. However, from that date the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966 Schedule 3 Amendment Order came into force, removing docking from the list of treatments and operations that may be carried out by unqualified persons.
- **Only qualified registered veterinary surgeons are permitted to carry out the docking procedure**, without any required anaesthetic, before a puppy's eyes are open, which normally occurs at around 10 days of life.
- A **veterinary surgeon**, through his professional training and experience, **will carry out docking by the most efficient means**, using aseptic technique and with the minimum of stress to the puppy. **The veterinary surgeon will also competently advise the owner on post-operative care.**
- **Given that only registered veterinary surgeons are presently permitted to dock dogs' tails, all lay docking already being illegal, any further regulation of docking within the Bill will restrict only the action of vets.**

Arguments often used against docking

- There are many arguments often used against prophylactic tail docking, however, there is a total lack of scientific evidence to support their allegations. **This is even admitted by the Australian veterinarian Robert Wansborough, who produced an anti-docking report in July 1996 and John Bower former BVA President agrees that pain is not an issue:**
"There have never been any scientific studies or double blind trials to compare the effects of tail docking in one sample of dogs with a similar sample of undocked dogs. Similarly, there have been no studies that measure the initial pain and the ongoing pathological pain inflicted on docked dogs" Cosmetic tail docking of dogs tails Australian Veterinary Journal, Vol 74, No 1, July 1996

"Pain is possibly the least powerful argument, as it is so slight". (John Bower MRCVS, former BVA President, **anti-docking** written submission to the Scottish Parliamentary Environment and Rural Affairs Committee).

- The examples that anti-docking groups use to illustrate bad practice have been carried out illegally by laypersons. **It is illegal for anyone other than a registered veterinary surgeon to carry out this procedure.**

1. Isn't pain involved in docking?

- Docking is carried out when the puppies are extremely young. Experience indicates that the procedure causes no pain or discomfort. **After properly performed docking, every puppy rejoins its siblings, quietly finds a comfortable position and immediately goes back to sleep.** There is no evidence that development or weight gain is in any way arrested by the docking procedure.

2. Isn't the dog's balance and communication affected?

- Dogs which have been docked as puppies do not have any problems with balance or communication. **For instance, acute balance skills are needed by greyhounds during racing, however, those dogs which have had tails docked due to injury suffer no balance impairment during subsequent races.**
- **Communication in dogs is primarily an interaction by smell, facial expression and body posture.** The tail plays a small part in the process and experience shows that the absence of a tail has no effect on canine communication skills. **Naturally docked breeds interact normally with both humans and other dogs.**

3. Isn't there a risk of perineal hernias and weakness of the anal muscles?

- No scientific paper or recognised scientific study has ever supported either assertion.

Position of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons and British Veterinary Association

- The RCVS has adopted an official policy against tail docking in dogs. **This position was reached without any scientific evidence and without either an open debate or a vote on the issue.** The British Veterinary Association has also adopted a similar policy. **The RCVS has stated that it considers docking to be "an unjustifiable mutilation and unethical unless done for therapeutic or acceptable prophylactic reasons".** It does not believe that prophylactic docking to prevent injury at some unspecified time in the future is reason enough to dock. ***RCVS has tried unsuccessfully to stop its' members from docking and is now looking to the Government to do this for them.***

In the absence of any evidence or debate the RCVS's position is rejected by many vets, particularly those acquainted with both breeding and working dogs. Many individual veterinary surgeons dock tails at their clinical discretion, despite pressure from the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) to stop carrying out the procedure. These vets clearly believe that in their professional judgement, docking is a humane and important for animal welfare.

Although, at ten days of age the future lifestyle of any dog cannot be predicted with absolute certainty, leaving the docking procedure until the dog is any older will cause far more suffering as it now becomes surgical amputation.

Natural bobs

- It must be noted that **certain dog breeds may be born with a natural 'bob'**, that is to say with a short or absent tail.
- Natural bobs are known in the Brittany, whilst they are also present from time to time in the Old English Sheepdog, Pembroke Corgi, Australian Silky Terrier, Swedish Valhund, Australian Shepherd Dog, Standard Poodle etc. As such if docking is excluded from the list of permitted procedures, **provision must be made to ensure that owners of dogs, which have been born with a natural bob, do not face prosecution.**

Conclusion

- **The CDB believes that future legislation should provide sufficient flexibility for the continued docking, by registered veterinary surgeons, of traditionally docked breeds.**
- **The CDB believes that to ban the prophylactic docking of dogs would, as in Sweden, result in unnecessary suffering for large numbers of dogs.** As such it would be extraordinary that a measure designed to improve welfare would have the opposite effect.

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