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"The greatness of a nation and its moral process can be judged by the way its animals are treated." - Mahatma Gandhi

A New Era for Veterinary Medicine in Alberta

On February 24, 2019, the Alberta Veterinary Medical Association's membership gathered at our Annual General

Meeting to vote on a series of resolutions, including banning Alberta's veterinarians from performing procedures deemed medically unnecessary by our profession. The ban—of which a strong majority of members voted in favour—include the following procedures:

- ear cropping
- tail docking
- tail nicking
- tail blocking
- partial digit amputation (declawing or onychectomy)
- tendonectomy
- front dewclaw removal
- cosmetic dentistry
- body piercing
- tattooing that is not for the purpose of registration and identification
- devocalization

The decision to include these particular procedures was based on the best available research informing a growing demand by our profession to act in the best interests of animals and the public.

Still, these practices have a long history, and the myths of benefits that have become intertwined with the tradition, especially in the case of tail docking and ear cropping, are not easily dismantled. The following explores the history, tradition and rationale behind these procedures, while examining the scientific evidence and animal welfare implications that support banning them.

Medically Unnecessary Procedures: a Brief History and Evidence Against the Practice

Because tradition is deeply rooted in identity and are rarely dismantled without a willingness to examine and confront difficult topics, tradition can stifle progress. This counterbalance between progress and tradition challenges us to locate blind spots, identify and confront our own personal biases, contemplate what is ethical, and consider past, present, and future implications of certain actions. This goes to the core of the veterinary profession considering this issue, ensuring ethical and humane decisions are made within the profession with animal welfare as its primary objective.

Tail Docking and Ear Cropping

Tail docking and ear cropping are two of the most common forms of unnecessary medical procedures with a history rooted in tradition. In the case of tail docking, it was thought to have health benefits in a time predating not just bacteriology and vaccines, but the scientific method in general. In the age of the Roman Empire, it was believed that tail docking, as well as tongue clipping, warded off rabies — one of the most lethal zoonoses of the era. The practice was also prevalent in 18th Century England, when tail docking was used to differentiate working dogs from companion animals, for the purpose of taxation. Other common beliefs were that tail docking improved back strength and enhanced speed, as well as preserving a keen sense of smell, on the basis that a tail covering the nose of a sleeping dog would hinder its ability to perform guard duties.

Ear cropping was a procedure commonly performed on hunting dogs such as Great Danes, which were used for hunting boar. It was believed cropped ears prevented injury in the heat of the hunt. The practice was also prevalent with dogs bred for fighting, to avoid particular injuries in the ring. One other reason for ear cropping was the belief that it reduced the risk of ear infection — a belief that is simply not supported by scientific evidence.

Despite their questionable and often troubling origins, tail docking and ear cropping persisted well beyond advances in science, such as Louis Pasteur's discovery of the rabies vaccine in the late 19th Century, along with society's rejection of the cruel sport of dog fighting and the anachronistic practice of boar hunting with Great Danes. Instead, the practice of tail docking and ear cropping became so commonplace, their justification shifted from the original position of misguided health benefits to a firmly entrenched belief they were central to traditional breed aesthetics, despite them having no bearing on any breed's genetic pedigree.

A common justification for performing these procedures is the inaccurate belief that, because young nervous systems aren't fully developed, puppies do not feel pain, as evidenced by instances of some puppies nursing and falling asleep following these procedures. A growing body of research over the past 20 years shows that puppies, like human babies, actually experience hypersensitivity to pain. This is because pain receptor cells are mature at birth, but the inhibitory pathway, critical in modulating pain and reflex to pain and distress, is still undeveloped for at least a 10-day period. In other words, pain is translated at a higher level, not a lower one.

Then one must take into account the introduction of unnecessary medical risks, such as bleeding and infection resulting from cosmetic procedures. In the case of tail docking, this involves amputating bone and cutting tendons, which can lead, among other things, to amputation neuromas. Amputation neuromas are bundles of nerve fibers that develop when axons are severed, resulting in swollen tangles of nerves, in the form of a single large mass or as several smaller, distributed masses. While some neuromas heal over the course of several weeks, there is documented evidence that some will exist indefinitely, causing chronic pain.

Tail Blocking and Nicking

Two procedures that were once commonly performed on show horses are tail blocking and nicking. These practices have largely fallen out of favour, although they are still legal in Canada and some US states. Both of these procedures hinder or eliminate a horse's ability to perform natural behavioural functions, such as swatting flies and using the tail to communicate, which, in addition to the pain and resulting health issues brought about by these procedures, confronts us with a moral and ethical question regarding human intervention in this regard.

So why do some horse owners still engage in the practice? The answer: purely for cosmetic reasons. Nicking is sometimes performed on horse breeds to satisfy show standards that reward an erect tail. The practice's origins are unclear, but, like docking, it may have developed to keep the tail clear of harnesses. Today, its only purpose is to satisfy cosmetic requirements in the show ring.

Blocking has the opposite effect of nicking, whereby an agent—usually alcohol—is injected into the tail near major nerves, causing damage and deadening, resulting in the tail lying flat.

Partial Digit Amputation, Tendonectomy and Front Dew Claw Removal

Partial digital amputation, known as “declawing” among the broader public and “onychectomy” in veterinary medical nomenclature, is the removal of distal phalanges—the end bone, beginning at the last knuckle, on a feline paw. This procedure was popularized in the 1970s, during a time when indoor cats became more common. The purpose of this procedure is to prevent cats from scratching furniture, property and people, but it is not without consequences for the animals who undergo this elective procedure.

Partial digit amputation can result in chronic pain, behavioural issues, and difficulty using a litter pan. While there are rare instances where this procedure is medically necessary, the bulk of partial digital amputation procedures are performed without any medical justification, whatsoever.

What's more, the risks associated partial digit amputation are significant. Based on a meta analysis of research examining cats who underwent partial digit amputation, between 50 and 80 per cent had one or more medical complications post-surgery.

Thanks to a heightened awareness of responsible pet ownership and alternatives effectively redirecting the natural feline behaviour of scratching, partial digit amputation has become less and less acceptable..

Tendonectomy is a related procedure that involves the cutting of tendons to prevent a cat from extending its claws, to achieve the same desired effect as partial digit amputation. While it is less invasive, less painful, and has less of a recovery time than partial digit amputation, the procedure is not without complications. Cats who undergo this procedure still have a high risk of lameness, bleeding, and infection. Tendonectomy does not prevent claws from growing but it does prevent cats from extending their claws. Because they're not able to manage nail growth through normal behaviour such as scratching, they require regular ongoing nail trims from their owners.

In dogs, front dewclaws have been surgically removed for many years under the sentiment that they posed a risk through injury.

Like tail docking, supporters of front dewclaw removal claim that surgically removing them prevents potential for future injury. But the reasoning, which posits mitigating the low-percentage risk of dewclaw injury in canines is best achieved through surgical removal of dewclaws, is structurally flawed and lacks cogency. By that same logic, one could reason cutting off a leg would prevent 100% of future leg injuries. For good reason, no reasonable person is making this argument. Which brings us back to the debate regarding front dewclaws: surgically removing a digit or appendage, which presents the same risks of pain, bleeding, and infection, is not the best way to prevent potential future injuries that may result in pain, bleeding, and infection.

Cosmetic Dentistry

Cosmetic dentistry is any non-therapeutic dental procedure undertaken to change the appearance of an animal's teeth. It is done at the request of, and for the benefit of the owner, for instance, to meet a breed standard.

Tattooing and Body Piercing

Given the rise in popularity of tattooing and piercing over the past few decades, it was only a matter of time before some pet owners wanted to embrace the trend through their pets. While there are practical reasons to tattoo some pets for the purpose of identification, there is simply no justification for invasively altering a pet's appearance purely for design and aesthetic. Such practices are painful, inhumane, and wholly unnecessary.

Devocalization

Listed in small animal surgery textbooks under its scientific name, venticulocordectomy, devocalization is described as being primarily for therapeutic purposes, such as laryngeal paralysis and to remove vocal cord masses. However, the procedure's cosmetic angle resulted from pet owners, most commonly dog owners, requesting debarking to reduce what was deemed a disruptive, annoying, or shrill bark. This is achieved by removing varying amounts of an animal's vocal cords, and it does not always permanently inhibit a dog's ability to bark at its natural volume.

While excessive barking is the most common reason people request this procedure, it's crucial to note that barking is a normal canine behavior and an important means of communication, whether at play, greeting other people and pets, emphasizing warning, gaining attention, or working. Excessive barking is often the result of underlying behavioural issues, such as boredom, isolation and anxiety, each of which can be addressed in other, more humane ways than devocalization.

Devocalization does not occur without the substantial risk of complications. Bleeding, acute airway swelling, infection, coughing, gagging and aspiration pneumonia can occur after devocalization surgery. There is also a substantial risk for development of scar tissue and glottis stenosis (narrowing of the throat) after laryngeal surgery, and affected dogs often require further surgical intervention.

Conclusion

Each of the medically unnecessary procedures explained above are at odds with the trust society places in the veterinary profession to act in the best interest of our animal patients. Each requires specific veterinary skills and knowledge for the purpose of misrepresenting the quality of an individual animal, usually for nothing more than aesthetic or cosmetic reasons, which our members overwhelmingly affirmed at our AGM, are no longer acceptable.

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