

## TAIL DOCKING – Key Evidence Used Against Breeders by the British Veterinary Association, Turns Out to be Good for Breeders & Bad for Anti-dockers.

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Protagonists of docking maintain that, besides being keen to preserve tradition, they dock many breeds to reduce the risk of tail injuries. However, antagonists of docking, such as the BVA & RSPCA, argue that it leads to serious health problems in later life (eg., urinary incontinence, neuromas, attacks by non-docked dogs because of communication difficulties, etc) & is such a "barbaric mutilation" that it cannot be justified on prophylactic grounds. In view of the fact that no quantitative data were available to support either claim, Darke, Thrusfield & Aitken (Association between tail injuries and docking in dogs, Veterinary Record, 116: 409, 1985.) said they would "investigate whether docking is associated with a reduced occurrence of damage to tails." They did this by examining a 10 year data base of clinical case records of the Small Animal Practice Teaching Unit at the Univ. of Edinburgh.

Re-examining the study at this time when the British Parliament is considering milestone legislation in the form of the Animal Welfare Bill, has revealed five noteworthy points :

1. Docking does not lead to health problems. The data actually show there is a much greater number (a factor of x3.6) of non-docked dogs which presented for treatment of any kind. If, as maintained by antagonists of docking, there are untoward side effects of docking, a relatively greater number of visits to the vet by docked breeds must be expected. That is, 12,129 consultations were recorded, of which 9513 were dogs of traditionally non-docked & 2616 traditionally docked breeds. Because around one-third of all breeds are docked, if there was no bias towards either non-docked or docked breeds, theoretical subdivision of the total would yield values of 8086 & 4043 (respectively). Therefore, these data clearly indicate a distinct bias towards bad health in non-docked breeds (9513 visits vs. the theoretical value of 8086) & good health in docked breeds (2616 visits vs. the theoretical value of 4043). However, it is probably unreasonable to suggest that this is a reality, but perhaps the bias could be due to some other factor(s) such as cross-breeds in the non-docked group or greater care of purebred dogs which are likely to form a greater proportion of docked than non-docked dogs. What we are undeniably left with, is the fact that the numbers of visits to the veterinarian show that there is absolutely no bias towards there being more health problems in traditionally docked than in non-docked breeds.

2. Strictly speaking, traditionally docked breeds are not directly comparable to non-docked breeds in terms of tail injury, because the principal (although not sole) original purpose of docking was to shorten the tail of those breeds which were originally found to be particularly susceptible to tail injury. Therefore, the truly valid test of the prophylactic value of docking is to compare docked with undocked individuals within traditionally docked breeds. For example, it is pointless to compare tail injuries in German Shorthaired Pointers with English Pointers because the much greater prevalence of injuries in the GSP (when originally being developed) is precisely the reason it began to be docked. There were & still are few injuries in the English Pointer & therefore it does not require & has not ever required docking to protect it. (This difference is presumably due to the lower tail-set in the English Pointer.)

### TAIL INJURIES - NO – THEY'RE NOT JUST GOING AWAY!!!

We continue to receive reports of undocked Vizslas that have significant injuries to the ends of their tails and frequently require amputation, ironically to the point where they would traditionally be docked.

It is a WELFARE ISSUE – please don't think this is politics. Animal husbandry practices have origins not only in history, but also in practicality and welfare. Please don't ignore this issue – if you have a Vizsla with a tail injury, take a few moments to download a form from the Club's website – [www.vizsla.org.au](http://www.vizsla.org.au), complete it and send it to Ruth Brooks. Alternatively, contact Ruth or Ros and they will mail a form to you.

It's also very IMPORTANT that you include information on veterinary costs, and perhaps copies of relevant x-rays and photographs of the injury or the bandaged tail and even the blood on the walls!! (Aim for a bit of 'in focus' photography here folks! J)

There have only been a limited number of litters born since the tail docking ban was introduced, and it's only those puppies from the litters that are old enough to have had protracted and unsuccessful treatment that have so far progressed to amputation. There WILL be more.

This is not just about a hunting dog injury, but rather an injury of companion dogs. The dogs who've been reported to us have been pet dogs – dogs who hit their tails on furniture, kitchen benches, garden furniture, when playing with the children, in cars, etc etc etc. What we are currently seeing is an injury not necessarily or

exclusively related to hunting, but rather to daily existence in our homes and families. This is the factor that must be addressed – after all, by far the greater population of our breed is in family homes, participating in normal family activities. Sure, some are hunting but as restrictions become ever tighter on those pursuits, it will be the home body



dog whose injuries we continue to see more frequently.

A couple of tales (forgive the pun!) from owners whose dogs have had surgery since we last reported the issue.

HAWK - HAWK IS TWO YEARS OLD.

*Over the last 2 years he has smacked his tail on anything and everything including family members' legs and children's faces. To start with this caused calluses to build up on the last part of his tail (the exact length to which it should have been docked) getting bigger and more in number. He started to get a kink in the end of his tail, which is all lumps and bumps and he continually chewed it. In December 2005 one of the calluses split slightly I put cream on and monitored it closely.*

*In January 2006 I noticed blood splats on the wall. On checking Hawk's tail, I found 2 splits on one callus, I took him to the vets who gave him antibiotics in case of infection and said that he would not amputate this time in case the infection had gone all the way down his tail as this would cause more problems. He said I should keep in touch. We secured a tube on his tail, within minutes of being home the tube and tape had been flung across the yard - it was extremely hard to keep anything attached to the tail.*

*Three days later some of the other calluses had split and I had blood on everything including my legs, and my granddaughter. I immediately rang the vet who said to take him in and he would amputate. The vet asked me to mark his tail where it should be amputated, and was so understanding.*

*Had this been done as a neonate, he would not be going through stress, trauma and pain, which he is now aware of. He is going to need constant monitoring for the next week and plenty to occupy his mind to divert his attention.*

*Even close friends stop calling in as they do not want to be covered in blood so poor Hawk had to be locked up when people visit.*

*The ban on tail docking is so cruel and against animal husbandry practice (and I am an ex 23 years RSPCA officer!) Ruth*

AND RONNIE

Bandages came off Ronnie's now shorter tail today after nearly a month since his operation. If we had known immediately after the operation that strapping it to his leg to stop it wagging and whacking walls could prevent it being traumatised, we would have done so and halved the time that it needed to be bandaged. While he has been very long suffering with having his tail freshly strapped to his leg each morning, and has been very good about leaving the bandages alone, he has had a gutful of having it strapped to his leg. Here's hoping we can avoid any further bleeding and can forget about it - otherwise, the only way is to shorten it more (it's currently

Consequently, the Edinburgh data actually indicate a 15-times higher rate of tail injury in traditionally docked than in non-docked breeds. That is, the most valid comparison based on the data presented by Darke et al is to take the commonly assumed estimate that 5% of the pups of traditionally docked breeds are not docked, ie., 5% of 2616 = 131. Eight injuries of 131 = 6% of these with tail injuries. The traditionally non-docked group had 39 of 9513 with injuries, = 0.4%, a 15-fold difference. In fact, the "0.4%" is the value employed by the Australian Veterinary Association supposedly to illustrate how few tail injuries there are & therefore how unnecessary docking is. What the AVA failed to point out is the fact that their data came from breeds which were not docked because they never needed to be docked.

3. The Edinburgh Univ. case records did not specify whether or not each individual dog had been docked & therefore Darke et al assumed there had been normal docking practice according to breed, ie., all Boxers were assumed to have been docked whereas all Whippets were assumed to not be docked.

We should therefore ask what bias any misclassification could cause & will it influence conclusions based on the data? The sole effect which any misclassification can have had on the "docked" data, is a negative one, ie., a dog with tail injury which they assumed to have been docked (because of its breed) might not have been docked, leading to an over-estimate of the number of injuries in docked dogs and the conclusion that docking is not beneficial in terms of avoiding injury. Likewise, or conversely, the sole effect which any misclassification can have had on the "non-docked" data, is a positive one, ie., a dog which had been docked (despite being of a non-docked breed) did not have a tail which could be injured, leading to an under-estimate of the number of injuries in non-docked dogs and the conclusion that a full length tail is not more likely to be injured.

Thus, misclassifications will have narrowed the difference between injuries to docked & non-docked dogs & caused a bias towards the conclusion that docking is not an effective prophylactic measure. This begs the question: "Because, for example, a dog cannot develop testicular cancer if it has been castrated earlier in life, how can a dog's tail be injured if it has been docked?" From this perspective, there is absolutely no need for such a study as that by Darke et al.

4. Notwithstanding the insurmountable problems described in "2" & "3", it is noteworthy that although Darke et al found the "odds ratio" which they employed as a test of the strength of association between tail injuries & the presence of a full tail, to be 1.28, they concluded there was not a positive association between tail injuries & an undocked tail; however, a value of one or greater does indicate significance.

5. Absolutely no conclusions about tail injuries in "working dogs" can or should be drawn from these data. However, the BVA web site is telling members "6. There is also no scientific evidence to show that undocked working dogs damage their tails any more than undocked non-working dogs. A seven year study at the University of Edinburgh Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies showed insufficient evidence of statistical significance to suggest a positive Association between tail injuries and undocked tails (Darke et al, 1985). You therefore see no justification for an exemption for working dogs and consider that any such exemption would be unworkable and would result in dogs continuing to be docked unnecessarily."

Yet, one of the authors has said in personal correspondence "we didn't stratify according to the working status, but all dogs were essentially family pets in the urban Edinburgh area, so that probably wasn't too critical."

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about 10" or more long - 5" was removed). At the moment it looks like a very good tail, in proportion to his body...

We've been using a big curler on the end of his tail, but even with that on he really bashes it. So we strap it to minimise the bashing (not helped by his apparent insensitivity to pain). Then he bites through the curler and the strapping, and pulls the dressing off, so he also has to wear an Elizabethan collar. We've all had it. I'm crating him at night to avoid him bashing it in the corridor outside the bedroom in the morning.

My advice to anyone who has to have their dog's tail shortened due to injury from excessive wagging resulting in it hitting things would be to be sure there is plenty of padding around the wound and strap the bandaged tail to the leg straight after the operation (firm enough to stop tail wagging much, loose enough that it is not uncomfortable and that when dog squats, he can still go to the toilet - strapping allows about 6 - 8" from the dog's hind leg, and if you put a separate bandage around the top of the hind leg so you can strap near the tip of the tail to the top of the leg to get a high angle, movement of the leg doesn't interfere and you don't keep ripping hair out whenever you have to re-strap to the leg). Using a curler protects a bit, but the extra weight seems to encourage the dog to chew the bandages more. This is a very manageable solution, which I wish I'd known about (or thought of) in the first 2 weeks, which is the usual recovery time.

Robyn

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