

Tail Docking – The Cons (there are no pros)

Tail docking is a matter of contention – a clash between animal welfare on one side and traditional ideas on the other. Tail docking has been banned in the United Kingdom, and now in the A.C.T. There are strong lobby groups at work to have similar laws established in all Australian States and Territories.

An overwhelming proportion of veterinarians and veterinary nurses are opposed to the procedure so clients requesting tail docking can expect resistance and a strong attempt to talk them out of doing it. The management of this practice condones these attempts. Note that according to the Veterinary Act of South Australia, clients cannot direct the treatment or other procedure conducted by a veterinarian – they can present a problem then agree or disagree to proceed with the suggested course offered. Thus a veterinarian cannot be demanded to perform a procedure of which he or she disapproves.

Why do we oppose tail docking?

The procedure is purely cosmetic; produces pain in the patient and on odd occasions can lead to secondary complications up to and including death.

We are faced with the following “arguments” -

- “ it prevents tail injuries, especially in foxing dogs” – we see almost no tail injuries, and most of those (>75%) are in Labradors (a breed not docked). Fox hunting dogs tend to go in headfirst and we have never seen a tail injured by a fox. According to breed society directions, true English fox terriers are to have a full hand span of tail left to facilitate grabbing it to remove them from burrows – which would be plenty for a fox to grab as well if it ever happened!
- “ we do it to sheep, why not dogs” – fly strike is not a problem in dogs. The comparison is raised but is irrelevant.
- “ puppies don’t feel much pain when docked” – so why do they scream and defaecate when it is done?
- “ older dogs get anaesthetised so they won’t feel any pain” – tail docking is a synonym for amputation. Docking involves cutting bone, tendon, muscle, blood vessels and nerves, all of which produces inflammation lasting days. Inflammation = pain. While under full anaesthesia, at the time the tail is cut, the respiratory rate and heart rate dramatically increase, an indication of pain.
- “ it is a safe procedure” – a small percentage of puppies will go into shock immediately after the procedure. This can be fatal. Older dogs requiring an anaesthetic also encounter the associated risks of that anaesthetic, and young patients sometimes have not fully developed their metabolism required to process anaesthetic agents. Breeds docked very short – Corgis, Rottweilers etc are also at increased risk of spinal infection. Remember that by it’s proximity to the anus, the tail is in a particularly septic spot.
- “ they quieten and look to suckle immediately so that shows they are content”. This is an incorrect assumption – young animals have what is called a suckle reflex – causing them to suckle whenever stressed and/or in pain. Farmers will see this whenever they disturb ewes with lambs at foot – the lambs will all begin suckling madly because they are stressed.
- “ it looks silly” – only because of what you are used to seeing – look now – over half or even 75% of terriers are now undocked. Clients in our clinic now comment more on docked terriers than undocked – “do people still dock tails?”. Tradition changes – everyone thought the Holden Commodore looked silly when it was released – it is now the top selling car! Ever wondered why German Short Haired Pointers are docked about 6 inches long, Weimaraners very short and Dalmations not at all yet they are all essentially similar shaped dogs?
- “ having a tail affects how they run” – yes, it does, but opposite to the claim. Removing the tail actually slows a dog, as the tail acts as a counter weight to assist balance when at speed.
- “ docking must have been started for a reason” – in England, some hundreds of years ago, pet dogs were taxed. Working dogs were not. How did they tell the difference? They docked the working dogs.

So if we are so opposed to it, why do any at all, why not blanket “ban” the procedure? Ironically, this is also due to animal welfare – we do puppies using sterile techniques, cautery, and anaesthesia if old enough. This is preferable to the axe in the backyard. We will still attempt to talk owners out of it however.