

Understanding canine compulsive disorder

More than 50 nursing delegates gathered in Dogs Trust in March to hear deputy head of canine behaviour at the Dogs Trust, Steve Howard, deliver a guide to canine compulsive disorder, writes Lorraine McDonnell



The topic of the first lecture of the day was 'compulsive disorder and how to deal with such cases'. The advice given was a guide to understanding dog behaviour and to maintaining high standards of welfare and safety for all personnel dealing with dogs.

Steve Howard highlighted the methods they use within Dogs Trust and how they, as a team, promote the use of positive reinforcement to increase the likelihood of a more appropriate behaviour. The seven steps to success were discussed, which included health, safety and security, maintenance behaviour, people interactions, dog interactions, object play and exercise, and the actual problem.

Steve looked at how we, as veterinary nurses, could make a difference in practice by correctly reading the signals and reducing stress for anxious patients. The more we learn about animal behaviour, the easier that becomes.

Our first step as nurses is recognising emotion. What is the dog's emotion? Is fear causing the aggression? The next

step is identifying the motivation. Why is the dog engaging in this behaviour? Is it predatory instinct? This could lead to aggression and destruction due to frustration. The next step discussed was to identify the reinforcement. What is the dog getting out of doing the behaviour (that makes him keep doing it)? In certain incidences, this is not always easy to recognise.

As the focus turned to emotions, we were introduced to the behaviour modification programme dealing with canine emotion. Karen Pryor's approach highlighted four ways we can modify behaviour using only positive methods:

- Reward the good behaviour;
- Avoid the trigger for the behaviour;
- Ignore the bad behaviour;
- Teach an incompatible behaviour.

The 'ladder of aggression' was introduced to show how most people miss the initial signals of aggression until it is too late.

Tell-tale signs a dog is under stress include panting, yawning, lip licking and looking away from the source of concern.

WHY DO DOGS BITE?

As we are aware, veterinary clinics are busy places with a variety of species in the same area, resulting in high stress levels. This can mean that a dog finds it difficult to cope in these situations. There are two categories in which bites are most likely to occur:

- Flooding; and
- Frustration.

Flooding is defined as exposure to a fear-eliciting stimulus with no means of escape. The critical part of this is the fact that the dog feels it has no means of escape.

Frustration occurs when a dog is unable to complete a desired behaviour. This is less likely to be the motivation to bite a vet, but handlers must be aware, if they have muzzled the dog, to only remove the muzzle once the situation has calmed down.

ENRICHING ANIMAL EXPERIENCES

After everyone had enjoyed a hot lunch we went straight to our practical sessions with some help from some four-legged friends. All the theory we learned was put into practice. We explored how to keep a confined animal mentally stimulated, and the various elements required in our understanding. Environmental enrichment can be split into two main categories: animate and inanimate. Animate essentially refers to other living attachment figures, ie. other dogs and other species, including us.

Inanimate enrichment consists of items we can add to the animal's environment which the individual can interact with or use to gain enrichment. We explored how exercise and handling, and how we interact with the dogs in our care, will have a direct impact on their quality of life and welfare. Food, activity toys and puzzle feeders can be a great way to both extend the time spent finding and consuming their daily feed allowance. A note of caution is required with food activity toys, as some dogs find them incredibly frustrating and stress levels can increase if the puzzles are too difficult to solve. Some easy and cheap alternatives were suggested, eg. an empty water bottle with the lid taken off and a few treats inside, or cardboard tubes filled with shredded or scrunched-up newspaper with treats mixed in, can make a fun activity toy.

WHY DO DOGS BARK?

The final lecture of the day turned our attention to the age-old question of why dogs bark.

Is it for communication, to alert that something is present, or boredom? The usual suspects are the visitors to the house, postal workers, delivery people, dustbin collections, wildlife, cats and being left alone.

We discussed options open to dog owners and the fact that, due to the difficulty of dealing with a barking dog when you are not home, people are often pushed into

using punishment-based methods in an attempt to stop the undesirable behaviour. Anti-bark collars are often used in an attempt to stop the barking without taking in to consideration why the dog is barking in the first place. This is a punisher as it is designed to stop behaviours.

It is widely accepted that any positive or negative reinforcement or punishment will alter responses, and that the potential pitfalls should be recognised.

Use of negative reinforcement, positive punishment and negative punishment can all be detrimental to the relationship with your dog. Conditioned suppression, the use of positive punishment (and, to a lesser extent, negative punishment) can lead to conditioned suppression and/or spontaneous recovery (very often the behaviour will be stronger). The dog may be suppressing behaviours due to the possibility of punishment.

Some videos were shown to illustrate these behaviours, eg. where a person was being bitten by a Labrador after a period of conditioned suppression, she experienced spontaneous recovery and the bite was severe.

Behaviours suppressed by punishment may return. Often, this re-emergence of the behaviour is more vigorous than previously seen.

We were left with a few questions to investigate before we act. Ask:

- Why is my dog barking?
- How can I make them feel more confident so they don't feel the need to bark?
- What can I do to teach them to do something that is more appropriate?

If they are barking at a visual stimulus, maybe access to the front door or window needs to be limited. Something as simple as shutting some blinds or curtains can make a difference.

What if they are barking at noises outside? There are a number of desensitisation CDs available to help dogs get used to sounds. Should we leave a radio on or the TV? Do thundershirts make a difference? It wasn't clear cut and, although some had had positive experiences, others had not. Try to understand why they are doing it. Try to consider the welfare implications for the dog if just focusing on the owner's needs. Help owners come to a better solution for all involved.

We watched the video of teaching a dog to bark on command so we could also teach a command for no more barking. This video and many of the other videos are available on YouTube.

We, the IVNA, would like to thank everyone who supported this event, particularly the Dogs Trust for supplying the venue and Joseph Campbell at Allianz who sponsored our lovely lunch.

Thank you to everyone who came and we hope to see you next year!

If there are any topics that you would like us to cover in our upcoming event please e-mail your suggestion to enquiries@ivna.ie