

Reports and Comments

Regulating services in relation to training and behaviour modification in dogs in the UK: the challenge ahead

Imagine a situation where the healthcare of animals was almost completely unregulated, with anyone being able to set up in practice and offer their services, treat the most complex of cases with no need of even the most basic of training or education, of self-styled experts who have responsibility delegated to them by other professional bodies and organisations with little or no checks on their competency and allowed to make decisions that may result in the death of an animal. Imagine no more, for this is the situation outlined in the most recent report from the Companion Animal Welfare Council; welcome to world of training and behaviour modification in the UK.

For those with little or no dealings with this area, the report may come as a shock. We are now all well aware that the welfare of an animal depends upon both its physical and mental health, and yet for the mental health of an animal in the UK to remain so unregulated seems an aberration. It is, perhaps, one of the last relics of the battle over the last 40 years to have behaviour taken seriously as an area of welfare concern.

So what solution does the CAWC report propose? The report makes nine recommendations, broadly based upon a self-regulatory model, where interested organisations and parties come together to agree a common framework of standards and conduct. Included in these are membership of a professional body or trade association, appropriate education to a set of nationally-recognised standards and recognition by individuals active in this area of the limits of their competency and knowledge, possession of appropriate insurance and adoption of a programme of continuing professional development.

The report also highlights that the recent UK Animal Welfare Act 2006, with its duty of care requirement may provide a means by which agreed minimum standards for animal welfare can be enforced.

Two schemes currently in existence are picked out for particular support; that of the Kennel Club scheme for the accreditation of instructors in dog training and canine behaviour and the ASAB accreditation scheme for the certification of clinical animal behaviourists (CABs). The former is an all-inclusive scheme which has the ambition to recognise and accredit achievement across the totality of activities undertaken by those interested in dog behaviour. The latter, which is endorsed by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, the British Psychological Society and the International Society for Applied Ethology, amongst others (and which already meets most, if not all, of the recommendations demanded by the CAWC report of such schemes), aims to provide an independent kitemark of excellence to which veterinary surgeons, pet owners and others seeking advice on the treatment of behavioural

disorders in their animal, whatever their species, can turn with confidence. Of the two, the report sees the Kennel Club scheme, because of its inclusivity, as providing a template for how behavioural services relating to dogs and other species should be regulated, with the more exclusive ASAB scheme — exclusive because it demands a higher standard of knowledge and competency — providing a benchmark within it as to the standard that those dealing with behavioural disorders must meet.

This, at least, is the message that one comes away with on a preliminary read of the report and, indeed, probably the message that its authors wanted to get across. The devil is in the detail, however. On closer scrutiny, inconsistencies emerge within the report. These may reflect drafting errors or unresolved differences of opinion between the authors of the report, but certainly highlight some of the difficulties that will be faced by those trying to agree standards.

The report's summary lists some important definitions of terms that it then uses throughout. Firstly, it distinguishes between trainers and behaviourists — stating that whilst both use behavioural modification programmes: trainers do so in a 'preventative capacity' whilst behaviourists (CABs) work in a 'resolving capacity'. The term Behaviour Modification Practitioner (BMP) is then defined as the term it will use for anyone training or treating an animal's behaviour.

Later on, and despite its support of an inclusive national framework of standards, the report states that "a degree level qualification should be considered the normal minimal requirement for someone wishing to enter into BMP". Furthermore, it then goes on to say that although "it has been often claimed that there is clear distinction between problems that are purely of a training nature and those that are not, and thus a clear distinction between trainers and CAB (companion animal behaviourists)", in reality there is not; it is 'indistinct', ie trainers and behaviourists should be considered as the same. How these statements can be reconciled with calls for an inclusive framework is unclear; these latter statements seeming to favour, instead, regulation based on the standards of the more 'exclusive' ASAB scheme. Both schemes have their supporters and if such differences are to be resolved, an agreed common ground will have to be found.

Putting this to one side, the report makes some other welcome and long-overdue points. One target picked out for particular criticism are the 'celebrity' trainers who appear on television and in the media, and the motivation behind those commissioning these programmes; to concentrate on viewing figures rather than ensuring the quality and accuracy of advice given. This lapse of the 'Reithian' ideals of educating and informing the public can be seen as at the best regrettable and at the worst likely to lead to compromised animal welfare 'in the world away from the studio'.

Another important observation is the lack of status that is afforded to those involved in training puppies or assisting first-time owners, with their work often considered 'easy' or

'routine' by trainers with more experience. And yet, as the report rightly identifies, such individuals can have a profound influence, good or bad, on the development or prevention of problem behaviours. Despite this, but perhaps as a consequence of the low status, it is this group in which the requirement for education and experience is perceived to be the least but which, it could well be argued, should set the benchmark from which all other standards in this area derive.

Thus, the CAWC report is to be commended for highlighting the problems and issues that exist in this field of 'behaviour modification' and for laying out the challenges that face those looking for better regulation of this area. If tangible progress is to be made however, it is up to all those with an interest or investment in this area, trainers, 'behaviourists', veterinary surgeons, pet owners, animal rehoming charities, educational providers and the media, to identify their role in their resolution and to act appropriately. Models of best practice exist and have been identified, they now need to be adopted.

The Regulation of Companion Animal Services in Relation to Training and Behaviour Modification of Dogs (July 2008). 50 pp. A4. Companion Animal Welfare Council. Available from The CAWC Secretariat, The Dene, Old North Road, Bourn, Cambridge CB23 2TZ, UK or as specified at www.cawc.org.uk

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Migratory birds in research: animal user training

Taking the form of a power-point presentation with accompanying notes, this training module produced by the Canadian Council on Animal Care (CCAC) seeks to provide an introduction to the legal, ethical and safety considerations of working with migratory birds in research and conservation and to give details of publications and other suitable reference material from which further guidance can be sought. Within the module, there is discussion of issues relating to the planning of a study, the capture, restraint, health evaluation, banding and marking of birds, medical and surgical procedures, and the short-term housing and transportation, release and euthanasia of birds, amongst other subjects. As such, the module is a good overview and guide to anyone who is considering undertaking such projects for the first time and a reminder of the principles that should underlie practice for those already undertaking such work or who are involved in evaluating whether a project in this area should be given ethical approval to proceed. The report notes, however, that for those wishing to get involved in the actual trapping of birds, the information it contains needs to be complemented by further specialised practical and technical training and a good knowledge of the biology of the bird to be studied.

At the heart of the recommendations within the module is adherence to the principles of the Three Rs, which it believes can usefully guide practice. Acknowledging that whilst replacement of a species is not often likely to be possible, where possible, it suggests that thought should be

given to replacing a rare species with a more common one, depending upon the question being asked.

The first section, which deals with the planning undertaken in advance of a research project that requires the use of wild birds, establishes the approach that is taken throughout the rest of the module. It puts forward the principle that the safety of the birds should be given a higher priority than research considerations and that researchers should be prepared to abandon the study if adverse conditions arise. Other key considerations highlighted, include an understanding of all factors which affect both the quality of the data collected and the study species; the development of a protocol for what to do if a trapped bird is found to not be healthy or injured and consideration of ways of minimising disturbance that may lead to nest desertion or abandonment of territories, etc. Thought also needs to be given as to whether the procedures used in the project will have lasting negative effects on the study population. For any new approach, it recommends that pilot studies are undertaken so as to better judge such effects.

These and similar common themes are then developed in each of the remaining sections. With respect to when to trap, for example, the module notes that thought needs to be given as to the time of day, as diurnal birds released after nightfall may have difficulty finding a suitable roost and be vulnerable to predation, and to the time of year, eg birds in moult may have problems flying and during the nesting season birds are likely to be incubating eggs. For endangered species, minimising disturbance that might lead to nest desertion or increase the chances of predation are especially critical. Before undertaking the study, staffing levels also need to be sufficient to ensure that birds being caught are dealt with swiftly and effectively.

When choosing which method of capture to use, the module suggests that the effectiveness and impact of the method should be continually assessed, and reassessed if the combined injury/mortality rate exceeds 0.5%. When undertaking this assessment, it notes that consideration should be given to the underlying health of the birds prior to trapping and whether this is contributing to this rate. To aid this, some key indicators of health are given. Specific considerations relating to the use of different capture methods, eg mist nets, dip nets, bal-chatri raptor traps, etc, including frequency of monitoring and species of birds best trapped, are then detailed.

General principles and more specific concerns are then listed for the restraint of birds and their marking. For example, when using radio transmitters, the module states these must not exceed 5% of the pre-feeding/fasted body mass of the animal. The legal position and training required to band birds in North America is also outlined.

Throughout the remaining sections, the module continues to highlight areas that the researchers should be considering in advance of their study and monitor during its course and what should be considered good practice. For example, when taking blood samples, the module considers that for