



ASSOCIATION OF PET DOG TRAINERS AUSTRALIA INC.

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To Whom It May Concern

Proposed Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 2008 – Shock and Prong Collars

The Association of Pet Dog Trainers Australia (APDTA) is a national, progressive organisation whose mission is to enhance the human-dog relationship by educating trainers, other animal professionals and the public and to promote training methods that are humane, effective and based on current best practice. Our nearly seven hundred members typically provide advice to pet owners in their capacities as professional and volunteer dog trainers, groomers, breeders, veterinary nurses, veterinarians, shelter workers and others in the pet care or animal control professions.

Our organisation appreciates the opportunity to comment on the proposed changes to the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act (POCTA).

As stated in the Regulatory Impact Statement

“the community increasingly expects that animals should be treated humanely and that any unnecessary suffering must be prevented”⁽¹⁾.

Prong and shock collars work by applying an aversive stimulus to reduce behaviour – in learning theory this is known as positive punishment. Punishment based training can quickly escalate in intensity and frequency resulting in pain and unnecessary suffering to the animal.

In a study done by Hiby et al. it was found that the use of punishment when training dogs resulted in increased behavioural problems⁽²⁾. A more recent study by Schilder et al. showed increased stress responses and suggested compromised welfare for working dogs trained using electronic shock⁽³⁾. The proponents of shock collars have suggested that Schilder’s findings are not valid because “the researchers had no control over the intensity of the stimulation being used, the expertise of the trainers, and the range of behaviours targeted”⁽⁴⁾. However, would this not be exactly the case with average pet owners who lack the expert timing to ensure the dog associates the punishment with the undesired behaviour?

While shock and prong collars might suppress unwanted behaviour in the hands of a skilled and calm individual, the same devices can easily become implements of abuse

when unskilled, angry or frustrated individuals attempt to modify a dog's behaviour with their use. Yet they are promoted commercially on numerous websites as safe, simple, quick and easy method of training and modifying the behaviour of dogs. A typical example from one site states "the shock collar is the most ideal system for first time dog owners and non-experienced trainer"⁽⁵⁾.

Furthermore, prong and/or shock collars do nothing to alleviate underlying anxiety that is the cause of many behaviour problems. For example, if a dog is shocked for growling, the dog may simply learn to give no warning about biting (because it has learned these warnings are punished) and progress to biting with no warning signs. Equally distressing from a welfare perspective is the fact that inescapable punishment techniques can lead to a dog exhibiting a learned helplessness response where the dog becomes catatonic ceasing to respond at all.

Sadly it is also a fact that such devices have been used on children in abuse cases^(7,8) proving that, in the hands of abusive individuals, access to shock collars or prong collars provides a method of inflicting significant pain and suffering.

The Regulatory Impact Statement correctly points out:

"These (prong) collars ... have a high potential for misuse with serious welfare implications. While pronged collars are currently prohibited in Victoria, there are a small number of dog trainers and owners seeking to have this ban repealed"⁽⁹⁾.

The fact that Victoria had the foresight to ban prong collars in 1997 showed an advanced awareness of the growing level of public concern with such devices. The increasing interest in reward based dog training and more humane techniques reflects the on-going public attitude in this respect. To repeal the ban now would go against the sentiment of the AVA, expressed in the RIS, which APDTA shares, that the legislation should be:

"a reasoned response to concerns about cruelty to animals, and an appreciation of the concept that the way in which a country treats its animals may be taken as a measure of civilisation"⁽¹⁰⁾.

In our opinion, there is significant risk involved in making shock and prong collars available to deal with problems that can be addressed by more humane methods. Repealing the ban on prong collars or relaxing the restrictions on the use of shock collars is not in the best interest of dogs or the wider community.

With the many advances being made in behavioural medicine "The historic use of adversarial, coercive techniques no longer makes sense given what we know about dog cognition and learning"⁽¹¹⁾. APDTA is committed to the promotion of training methods based on respect of the dog as a sentient and cognitive animal and that enhance the human/animal bond.

We urge you to retain your current ban on prong collars and to implement a ban on shock collars in Victoria.

Yours sincerely

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