

Advice to Clients Regarding Dog Trainers

Kerry Vinson

I was recently asked to testify in court as an “expert” in the area of canine behaviour modification on behalf of the Durham Region Crown Attorney’s Office, in a case where animal cruelty charges were brought against a dog trainer who ran a facility where he supposedly corrected dog behaviour problems. Although this case dragged out for over two years in the court system due mainly to legal maneuvering by the defense, it finally came to trial in December of 2013 and a verdict was handed down on January 17th of this year. The “trainer” was found guilty on six counts of animal cruelty, which resulted in pain and suffering to dogs in his care. To my knowledge, this is one of the few (if only) cases in Ontario whereby a person was convicted of animal cruelty while presenting themselves as a “dog trainer” and purportedly engaging in training.

Unfortunately, over the years I have become aware of numerous similar situations where so called trainers have utilized methods that at worst have been abusive, and at best have been completely ineffective and counterproductive. While we may want to think that cases like the one in Oshawa was particularly egregious and rare, the truth is that they exist all over the province, but usually aren’t brought to light or prosecuted. This is so in Ontario because there are no accepted standards for dog training and no minimum level of competency required for anyone to engage in training, and to then employ whatever type of methodology they choose. You may think that dog owners would use “common sense” and avoid turning over their dogs to such individuals, but this doesn’t seem to be an area where common sense



has prevailed. One of the startling things I became aware of while reviewing hundreds of pages of disclosure documents and witness statements in this case was that many of the people who relinquished their dogs to the trainer involved did so mainly because his facility had a “really good website”!

One of the key areas that I was cross-examined over was the issue of whether subjecting dogs to the methods used in “dominance theory” training were inhumane, as such methodology was described by the defendant’s lawyer as merely being a tough approach that requires the trainer to intimidate dogs to ensure compliance with commands. The lawyer further asserted that “making the leap from a dog being suspended by a pronged collar to finding it caused more than a minimal amount of pain and suffering...is a stretch”. This despite several

of the dogs involved in the case allegedly being significantly traumatized and two of the dogs actually dying. He summed up by saying that there is “nothing illegal” about dominance theory training. Sadly, his last statement is correct.

So, with this in mind, can veterinarians in Ontario play a role in reducing similar incidents from occurring to their clients’ dogs, and how they go about this? According to Debbie Houghton, the Humane Society of Durham Region investigator who also testified on behalf of the Crown in this case, dog owners “should not entrust their dogs to any trainer who takes them away to behind closed doors to implement behaviour modification. Owners should be present at all times to observe the methods that are being used and to ensure nothing that may be de-

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Case STUDY

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there are multiple reports of small breed dogs being affected, and FCEM has been documented in cats.

Definitive diagnosis requires histopathology to confirm fibrocartilagenous material within the spinal cord and the associated ischemic injury. Antemortem diagnosis is based on a compatible history and clinical signs, with advanced imaging ruling out other causes of myelopathy. Changes in the spinal cord secondary to ischemic injury can be detected by MRI in dogs, with well-documented alterations in the signal characteristics occurring over time in humans. There is no specific treatment currently available in veterinary medicine, although early active physiotherapy has been shown to speed the onset of recovery. The prognosis is good, with the majority of dogs recovering function over weeks, although permanent deficits

can occur and the prognosis for recovery is poor in patients with absent nociception. In the case presented here, advanced imaging was able to rule out a compressive spinal cord lesion (and the requirement for decompressive surgery), and greatly reduce any suspicion of neoplasia which, unfortunately, is a common occurrence in Bernese Mountain Dogs. Magnetic resonance imaging strengthened the presumptive diagnosis of FCEM, allowing the patient to be discharged as early as possible and to start active physiotherapy immediately.

References:

- De Risio L and Platt S. Fibrocartilagenous embolic myelopathy in small animals. *Vet Clin Small Anim* 2010; 40:859-869.
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- Nakamoto Y, et al. Fibrocartilagenous embolism of the spinal cord diagnosed by clinical findings and magnetic resonance imaging in 26 dogs. *J Vet Med Sci* 2009; 71(2):171-176.

Dr. Colleen W. Mitchell, BSc., DVM, DVSc., DACVR,
Toronto Veterinary Emergency Hospital

Dr. Mitchell graduated from OVC in 1986. She spent 18 years in small animal practice in southern Ontario. During this time, she developed a special interest in radiology and ultrasound which prompted her to enter the diagnostic imaging residency program at OVC in 2004. Dr. Mitchell became a Diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Radiologists in 2007 and completed her thesis (MRI findings in spinal ataxia) and DVSc degree in 2009. Dr. Mitchell joined Morningside Animal Clinic (later TVEH) in 2008 as the first board certified radiologist in private practice in the GTA. Dr. Mitchell performs all inhouse ultrasounds and reviews all imaging studies done at TVEH (radiographs, CT and off-site MRI). Dr. Mitchell also accepts radiographic studies from referring veterinarians by electronic transfer or courier for evaluation.

Dr. Jonathan Huska, DipACVIM (Neurology),
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Dr. Jonathan Huska joined the staff at TVEH September 4, 2012 to head the Neurology Service. Dr. Huska completed a Bachelor of Science at the University of Guelph in 2004 and received his DVM in 2008 from the Ontario Veterinary College. Dr. Huska then completed a small animal rotating internship in Prince Edward Island at the Atlantic Veterinary College, before returning to the OVC to complete a 3 year residency in Neurology (Medical & Surgical). Dr. Huska is a Diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Internal Medicine (board-certified in Neurology). Dr. Huska enjoys camping, hockey, frisbee and soccer, but most of all, spending time with his wife and son.

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“fined as abusive is done to their dogs”. I agree with this statement wholeheartedly, and while you may think that such operations are not common in Ontario, you would be wrong. As dog training is a totally unregulated industry here, there are a surprising number of slickly marketed “boot camp” type facilities for dogs in the province; in many cases operating under the radar and without any type of accountability. Therefore, I would suggest that veterinarians forewarn their dog owning clients not to send their dogs to such a facility, no matter what types of promises are made to them.

I would also suggest that references for any type of dog behaviour modifying

operation be independently verified; do not depend solely on what you find on a website. I always encourage people to check with their veterinarian to recommend a competent dog trainer. If there is any sign of aggressive behaviour being displayed by a dog, it may be necessary to obtain knowledge that is over and above obedience training to deal with this, as canine aggression can be both complex and multi-factorial. Always seek out someone who focuses on positive reinforcement and the principles of Learning Theory, as simplifying aggression to the ideas traditionally put forth in “dominance theory” (i.e. using physical force or punishment to make a dog

obey) can be both counterproductive and/or dangerous in some situations.

Only by educating dog owners can tragedies like the one that happened in Oshawa be prevented.

Kerry Vinson, founder of Animal Behaviour Consultants, has a BA in Psychology and has extensively studied animal learning and behaviour modification. In addition to conducting seminars on canine behaviour at colleges and other venues throughout Southern Ontario, and assessing dogs with behavioural problems, he has been designated by the Province as an Expert Witness in the area of canine aggression and has testified in a Provincial Inquest and numerous other high-profile court cases. For more information, contact him at (800) 754-3920 or (705) 295-3920.