ISLAND PUBLIC HEALTH FORUM

Isle of Wight - October 1993

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SUBJECT: DOGS

When requested by Dr. Paul Bingham of the Isle of Wight Health Authority to present a short paper to the other delegates on some "public health problem" in the Isle of Man my initial reaction was "what problem can I discuss that is different in the Isle of Man, but relevant to other delegates?"

I chose the subject of "Dogs" because whilst I do not consider it to be a "public health problem", that is the perception by the public. As such it must be addressed - from within our finite resources - which in itself is a problem!

Before discussing this matter further it may be helpful to set the Isle of Man scale.

The Isle of Man has a population of approx. 70,000 persons.

There are approx. 30,000 households.

There are 24 local authorities.

The Island is approx. 224 square miles in area.

There are approx. 7,000 licensed dogs.

As I see it the problems with dogs are perceived as:-

(1) TOXOCARIASIS

As stated this is more of a perceived problem than an actual one, fired by media coverage of exceptional (but none the less tragic) infections.

My understanding is that the risk of infection decreases rapidly beyond the age of pica.

I am unaware of any epidemiological evidence, although I accept the difficulties of diagnosis, of a significant problem on the Island.

(2) AMENITY/NUISANCE

This mainly relates to fouling of footways, open spaces, etc.

The public will correlate the presence of dog faeces with a public health risk! Hence the pressure to act.

Whilst accepting that such material will always present a "risk", as a public health professional I have to assess the significance of that risk. In the concentrations seen around the Island I believe the "risk" to be insignificant, but do accept it is not conducive to the amenity of an area and can be a nuisance.

(3) TRAUMA

Whilst there are odd incidents of people being bitten, there have never been, and it is unlikely that there will be, attacks on the scale of recent horrific attacks in the UK.

(4) TRAFFIC HAZARDS

Loose, uncontrolled stray dogs can undoubtedly cause a traffic hazard. However, on the Island we do not have packs of stray dogs, as there are in some UK districts, which have "returned to the wild". Our problem is generally one of "latchkey" dogs, i.e., those sent out during the day either to "walk themselves", or while their owners are at work.

I have to admit that I cannot recall an accident on the Island caused by a stray dog, and conclude that such incidents are minor. It is recognised, though, that strays can be a nuisance - fouling, scavenging, etc.

Following much public debate on the "dog problem" during the 1980's (in common with the rest of the British Isles) Tynwald (the Island's Parliament) appointed a Committee of Tynwald to consider the matter.

The result of the various deliberations and debates was "THE DOGS ACT 1990" (an Act of Tynwald).

This Act gave the Department of Local Government and the Environment permissive powers in relation to dogs. In order to address the public concerns on the matter of dogs the Department resolved to "take up" those powers.

The Police have similar powers, but appear to have chosen not to "take them up".

The Dogs Act was to some extent a consolidation act, bringing together previous legislation relating to dogs, and introduced new provisions.

The Act came into force on 1st April, 1992.

The Act covers 4 main areas.

(1) Licensing

We believe that any system for the control of dogs must have a licensing system at its core. The Act provides that there must be a reduced licence fee for a dog that has been spayed or neutered.

Currently the annual licence fee is £8 for a "whole" dog and £4 for a spayed/neutered dog. (The Manx Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals wanted these licence fees to be £100 and £5 respectively). The responsibility for setting the licence fee was originally the responsibility of the Treasury, but this has now passed to the Department. It is hoped, in the long term, that a correct and adequate differential will result in most dogs being spayed/neutered, thus minimising unwanted pregnancies.

The position we wish to attain is that the only people who have dogs are those who have seriously thought of the implications, and, have had to go out and look for one! (and probably spend a not insignificant amount of money).

(2) Stray Dogs

This allows the seizure and destruction of dogs. We have seen this as our initial priority. The dog warden service, provided by private contract, has concentrated on this aspect since its inception in August 1992.

We see that a high profile in this respect addresses public concerns in relation to trauma, traffic hazards, and to some extent nuisance.

We have a policy of not destroying unclaimed dogs. They are re-homed through the Manx Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (after spaying/neutering). It has been suggested that some people may "take" their own dog from the MSPCA rather than collect from the dog warden and have to pay kennelling fees, etc.

In a small Island community this is not likely - people will tell. Where we have a suspicion that this may be the case: if the dog is seized again we insist it is only re-homed to somebody living somewhere distant from where it was seized.

With the licensing provisions and a commitment to the enforcement of the stray dog provisions, we see strays to be a diminishing problem in the long term.

(3) Byelaws

The Department has power to specify:

(a) footways/pavements where it is an offence for a dog to foul;

(b) areas where it is an offence for a dog to enter;

(c) areas where it is an offence for a dog to be at large;

(d) beaches where it is an offence for a dog to foul, and or be at large;

(e) areas where it is an offence not to remove faeces (poop scoop).

These byelaws are currently in preparation following extensive consultation with local authorities over the past 18 months.

I have to say that from the outset the Department has seen the function of the legislation as being to CONTROL dogs, not to BAN them.

Approx. 1 in 4 households have a dog, which is a significant proportion of the population. In asking local authorities to consider what byelaws they would like in which areas we gave certain parameters that they should have regard to:

(a) Children's Play Areas: should be a "ban". Such areas must, however, be securely fenced and gated for 12 months in the year.

This is to address the "toxocara concern" as the users of these facilities are those likely to exhibit pica.

It has to be stressed, however, that this is not the complete safeguard it appears as there are no controls on cats.

I have read in "Control of Communicable Disease in Man" by Benenson that a recommended preventive measure for Toxocariasis is to "prevent pica in children"! Suggestions on how to achieve this, short of strait-jackets or amputation, would be welcome!

(b) Amenity Areas (parks, etc.): should <u>not</u> be a "ban", unless there are other exercise areas available nearby. Generally these areas should be considered for "at large" byelaws, and "poop scoop" byelaws (subject to the necessary dedicated bins).

(c) Beaches: should have "at large" and "offence to foul" byelaws from 1st May to 30th September. A "stray" outside of this period can still be seized under the general provisions of the Act.

(d) Footways/Pavements: local authorities should identify problem areas and use "offence to foul" byelaws, or (more constructively) in crowded shopping streets, say, "poop scoop" byelaws (again subject to providing binnage).

It is believed that such byelaws, focused in that way, will address the major public concerns and be enforceable within existing resources. It should be noted that no additional resources were allocated to the Department to enforce the Dogs Act.

(4) Miscellaneous: There are general provisions relating to worrying of livestock, burying of animal carcasses, dangerous dogs, etc.

How successful have we been to date?

That is hard to say - the byelaws have not yet been made - but anecdotal evidence, and certainly my own experience, is that the Dogs Warden Scheme has been very successful in reducing the numbers

of "stray" dogs, and is supported both by the general public and the various "dog" groups.

If anyone would like a copy of our Dogs Act or our specification for the Dog Warden Service please let me know and we will be happy to supply them.