Tail docking and ear cropping in dogs: a short review of laws and welfare aspects in the Europe and Turkey

Cagri Caglar Sinmez, Ali Yigit and Gokhan Aslim

Department of History of Veterinary Medicine and Deontology, Erciyes University, Kayseri, Turkey; Department of History of Veterinary Medicine and Deontology, Kafkas University, Kars, Turkey; Department of History of Veterinary Medicine and Deontology, Aksaray University, Aksaray, Turkey

ABSTRACT

Ear cropping and tail docking in domestic dogs are complex issues involving economic, aesthetic, welfare and moral considerations. The protagonists of tail docking claim that tails have to be docked in order to prevent tail-tip injuries of working dogs in particular hunting dogs in the world and tails could cause problems through wagging in households. In Turkey, dog owners or breeders especially those with Turkish Kangal Shepherd dogs have the ears of their dogs cropped to prevent the injuries due to the fights with wolves and other dogs. Additionally, it is believed that injuries from the thorny iron leash are prevented and a better hearing capacity is warranted next to a better traditional aesthetic appearance. There is scientific evidence that dogs need their tails for balance and support, also the ear is known to have important functions in the dog’s body as anatomical and physiological and there is no rational reason to support the cropping of a dog’s ears or docking of their tail. Although both practices are forbidden by law in Turkey, ear cropping and tail docking are still practiced by a few veterinarians and breeders. In this study, the physiological and behavioural responses caused by tail docking and ear cropping in dogs are affirmed in terms of scientific evidence and rationale in evaluating animal welfare and laws in Europe and Turkey.

Introduction

Definitions and history

Convenience surgery is the definition of a set of surgical interventions in pets that are not justified from a veterinary medical perspective (Quartarone et al. 2012). These interventions include tail-docking, ear-cropping, de-clawing and de-barking. Tail docking is practiced for centuries and although it could be painful, it is often done without any anaesthetics (Johnson 2009). With tail docking all, or part of an animal’s tail is amputated (Bennett & Perini 2003a). Tail docking is also carried out in pigs to prevent tail biting and subsequent ascending myelitis and in sheep and cow for hygienic purposes. In the cold blood horse type and in many dog breeds docking is merely performed for aesthetic purposes (Sutherland & Tucker 2011; Sinmez et al. 2016).

Ear cropping and tail docking in domestic dogs are complex societal issues involving economic, aesthetic, welfare and moral aspects (Bennett & Perini 2003b). Pet welfare is without any doubt the primary responsibility of the owners, hence, it cannot be considered separately from the social and cultural environment of humans (Houpt et al. 2007). Evaluating dog welfare, the rule of the five freedoms of the Brambell Committee (1965) should be considered. The five freedoms (freedom from hunger and thirst, freedom from pain, injury and disease, freedom from physical and thermal discomfort, freedom from fear and distress, and freedom to express natural behaviour) provide valuable guidance in dog welfare. The objectives of the present study were to define possible physiological and behavioural responses caused by tail docking and ear cropping in dogs, to assess the scientific rationale for these procedures and to discuss the possible impacts of such applications on animal welfare and laws in Europe and Turkey.

Rationale and reasons for procedure

Dogs have been tail docked and ear cropped for centuries. The custom of ear cropping emerged
among early Turkish societies (Yilmaz 2013). This custom is still lively present in Central Asian Turkish Republics and ears of shepherd dogs are cropped together with tail docking. In ancient Anatolia, tails were docked since it was believed that long tails hindered the olfactory senses when shepherd dogs put their noses underneath their tails while sleeping thereby interfering with their guarding tasks. Over the last decades, tail docking had already been quitted on shepherd dogs in Anatolia (Yilmaz 2008).

In England, tail docking became common practice in 1786 when a tax was levied upon non-working dogs. Tails of dogs were docked to indicate their working status and hence were untaxed. Although later the taxing on non-working dogs was withdrawn, tail docking remained common practice for aesthetic reasons or supposed prevention of tail injuries and improved hygiene (Festa 2009). Formerly, about one third of the dog breeds were tail docked just by tradition. The protagonists of tail docking worldwide claim that tails must be docked for various reasons. Docking should prevent tail-tip injuries of hunting dogs and prevents tails caught by bushes or thickets. In households docking is supposed to prevent tail injuries caused by wagging. Other less transparent reasons include ease of control of terriers in dog shelters or other closed facilities, to prevent rabies, to provide a more wild appearance to dogs and to prevent abandonment of puppies (Morton 1992; Bennett & Perini 2003a; Ritter 2008). It has also been stated that tail docking prevents or decreases potential pile up of faeces around the tail. Faeces sticking around the tail according to dog owners result in fly irritations and worm invasion (Noonan et al. 1996a). A study carried out in Southwest Nigeria showed that breeders mostly docked the tails for traditional reasons such as well-appearance and better hygiene, to ease mating, to increase aggression and to prevent injuries (Fadeyemi 2014). The main reason for tail docking today is for aesthetic purposes (Quartarone et al. 2012).

The situation in Turkey is not different from elsewhere, especially the dog owners and breeders of the Turkish Kangal Shepherd dogs crop the ears of their animals to prevent that during wolf attacks or fights with other dogs the ears are grabbed. Furthermore, the owners also believe that long ears are prone to get injured by thorny iron leash or have reduced hearing ability. Fly strike on an injured ear in summer months would be less in cropped dogs. Finally, the traditional aesthetic appearance is warranted by cropping (Sinmez & Yasar 2013).

Welfare aspects

In evaluation of the techniques of tail docking and ear cropping the assessment of acute pain during the procedure and postoperative pain is the key issue. Behavioural indicators of pain, such as a resistance to come in contact with a painful stimulus and distress vocalisations, are often utilised, as are physiological indicators, such as a raised concentration of plasma cortisol or corticosterone, and increased heart rate (Bennett & Perini 2003a). Next to these physiologic parameters, the behaviours and parameters from neurobiology must be considered for a sufficient comprehension of the nature of pain in animals (Webster 1998).

Acute pain is present within seven days during the postoperative period. Pain of more than 7 days is defined as prolonged pain and over three months is defined as chronic or resistant postoperative pain (Ceyhan & Gulec 2010). Several studies showed that tail docking causes acute pain and distress in lambs, piglets and calves (Lester et al. 1991; Molony & Kent 1993; Lester et al. 1996). These results strongly suggest that docking of dogs’ tails also causes acute pain. Extrapolation of study results from production animal to pets may be hampered by different applied techniques. In production animals banding rather than docking the tails by surgical amputation is common practise. It could be argued, therefore, that the acute pain responses observed in agricultural animals is caused by the constant pressure of the elastic bands on nociceptors in the skin at the site of application, and that a shorter acute pain response might be expected following the rapid surgery typically used to dock dogs (Bennett & Perini 2003a). According to Kent et al. (1993), surgical docking might result in more acute pain and more prolonged distress than does banding procedure in lambs.

Dogs and lambs are two different animal species in terms of neurological development and pain sensitivity at certain ages. Dogs, like most carnivores, are born in a much less-developed state than are most herbivores. Whereas a 3 to 5 days old lamb exhibits a well-developed nervous system and complex behavioural repertoire, young pups of the same age have few fully functional sensory organs and exhibit very few behaviours (Bennett & Perini 2003a). Dogs are typically docked between 3 and 5 days of age, whereas lambs are sometimes docked much later ages. At a later age it might be expected that, since sensory and perceptive processes are more developed, any pain associated with docking may be intensified in all animal species. In lambs less than one week old, tail docking...
using a banding technique caused distress for approximately thirty minutes, as indicated by both behavioural measures and plasma cortisol levels (Molony & Kent 1993).

Tail docking is usually performed in puppies at an age of 3–4 days. Some authors believe that docking at later ages aggravates docking-induced pains because of developed emotional and perceptual processes of the dogs (Bennett & Perini 2003a). On the other hand, puppies have the lowest nociceptive thresholds and thus should experience more pain than the adult dogs (Moffett 2007). For many years, it has been believed that due to the myelinisation in newborn was not completed, their nervous system had not developed sufficiently to store pain experiences. Owing to this concept, tail docking was traditionally performed without anaesthesia or analgesics. However, studies in the last 20 years have proved this concept as totally wrong. Neonatal male dogs and rodent pups have a hyper pain sensitivity implicating that the pain experienced is more intense than less as previously believed. It was also accepted that the incomplete myelinisation of newborns does result in slower nerve conduction, but the shorter distance that pulses travel counter balance slower nerve conduction (Yilmaz et al. 2002; Derebent & Yigit 2006). Nociceptive cells are mature at birth, but the inhibitory pathway, which is critical in modulating pain and reflex activity to pain and distress is still undeveloped until at least ten days after birth, thus pain is translated at a higher level and not a lower (Dincer et al. 2011).

In particular, the tail is known to convey crucial information on motivational state and intent through complex interactions of its movement, position and size (Leaver & Reimchen 2008; Artelle et al. 2011). The position and motion of dog’s tail provide information including friendliness, playfulness, fear, submission, dominance and aggression (Wansborough 1996; Coren 2000). Quaranta et al. (2007) found that dogs wag their tails asymmetrically as a function of their motivational state. When dogs see a tail wagging to the right they are more relaxed, when the wag is to the left they become more stressed (Artelle et al. 2011). Tails are important both in visual and olfactory signalling because they carry scent glands (Hughes 1998). Also, one study using camera and electro myographic imaging confirmed that tail movements were important in maintaining body balance during locomotion (Wada et al. 1993). Docking likely decreases effective interaction of the dogs with each other. Increased social derangements may result in more aggressive behaviour of docked dogs (Wansborough 1996; Bennett & Perini 2003a). Thus, the continued cultural practice of tail docking in dogs compromises communication repertoires both for the signaller and receiver (Leaver & Reimchen 2008).

Leaver and Reimchen (2008) studied dog responses to robot dog models with four different tail positions (long still/long wagging, short still/short wagging) were measured and nine different behavioural variables were compared. Dogs expressed the highest level of interaction with long-tailed robot dog models. Dogs responded more to long wagging tailed robot dog models than short still or short wagging tailed models, large size dogs got close to long wagging tailed models more. Researchers ultimately concluded that tail docking weakened conspecific interactions.

The perception of owner of pain in puppies at tail docking was asked to 100 dog owners 25% replied that pups do not feel pain, 57% replied that docking resulted in mild pain (Noonan et al. 1996a). Johnson (2009) investigated people’ attitudes toward elective surgeries for pets including the controversial cosmetic procedures of tail docking and ear cropping of dogs. Many participants disagreed with the procedures of tail docking/ear cropping of dogs based on the idea that it was cruel and painful. Noonan et al. (1996b) monitored the changes in behaviour of 50 Dobermans, Rottweilers and Bouviers pups during and after tail docking and observed that dogs exhibited shrieking and whimpering behaviour during the tail docking. Shrieking and whimpering sounds decreased after 30 min and pups completely stopped vocalizations after 138 minutes, almost all experienced severe pain for short periods.

Darke et al. (1985) studied predisposing factors for tail injuries in 12,000 dogs of a university hospital population. These authors could not observe significant differences in tail injury ratios between undocked and docked dogs. In contrast, Houlton (2008) found for English springer and cocker spaniels that there was a strong association between tail injuries and being undocked. Furthermore, that study suggests that dogs with docked tails were less likely to sustain a tail injury. Characteristics risk factors for tail injury in dogs in Great Britain are dogs breed, tail wag angle and docking status. Despite these facts, it was deduced that the risk of tail damage was just 0.2% (Diesel et al. 2010).

Following docking, post-docking atrophy, pelvic muscle degeneration and risk for phrenic muscle integrity, increasing perineal hernia and faecal-urine incontinence problems may be observed in dogs (Wansborough 1996; Bennett & Perini 2003a). A survey with participation of 168 dog breeders in Northern Nigeria revealed the most frequent post-docking complications as infection/necrosis (36.9%), self-mutilation.
(20.2%), increased aggression (8.3%), attack by other dogs (5.4%), nervous signs (2.8%) and increased tendency to sleep (1.8%) (Fadeyemi 2014). One study showed a clear association between acquired incompetence of the urethral sphincter in both dogs and bitches to an overrepresentation of docked breeds, specifically the Old English Sheepdog, Rottweiler, Doberman Pinscher, Weimaraner and Irish Setter (Holt & Thrusfield 1993).

A study carried out in a veterinary faculty clinic with 228 dogs admitted to surgery between the year 1995 and 2000 showed that the most common surgical diseases were ear diseases 11% of the case load (Elma 1992). In another study carried out between the years 1998 and 2002 with 613 dogs of Gemlik region, the most common surgical problems were cropped ear wounds and other ear diseases (12%) (Sagliyan & Han 2003). Yilmaz (2008) indicated that the function of the auricle is to prevent eardrum from dust, soil, garbage, dirt-like extraneous substances, fly and mosquito-like insects, wind, snow and rainfall-like natural events and also indicated that the most commonly ear cropped Turkish Kangal Shepherd dogs performed their tasks quite well. However, no evidence can be found that ear cropping successfully prevents or treats ear infections.

**Legislation and regulations**

The controversy over legally forbidding tail docking and ear cropping of companion dogs originated already in the nineteenth century Britain (Delafenêtre 2009). Similar discussions went on in several other developed countries between the ear cropping and tail docking protagonists and their antagonists. Veterinary associations and welfare organisations, typically want the practice to be banned, whereas dog breeding associations and Kennel clubs vigorously oppose the anti-docking legislation. Some veterinarians claim that docking could be performed through painless and proper methods to prevent serious tail injuries of working dogs while others claim that docking still remains a cruelty anyhow since it deprived dogs from a significant interaction tool (Bennett & Perini 2003b; Fadeyemi 2014).

Many veterinarians believed that tail docking is an unacceptable procedure in general but particularly unacceptable in non-purebred dogs because these dogs were not used as show animals. However, other veterinarians felt that tail docking was reasonable, especially for some dogs to fulfill a breed standard or to reduce harms to people. Some veterinarians agreed to perform the surgery because they would perform the procedure more humanely (by using local anaesthesia), and/or perform the surgery better than would the client (Morgan 2009).

According to Australian National Kennel Council (2002), tail docking should be performed either by a veterinarian or experienced breeders or by anyone under the supervision of experienced breeders. Although tail docking is legal in Australia, some veterinarians refuse to perform tail docking and other perform tail docking just to prevent injuries resulting from tail docking of inexperienced people. Tail docking is legal in the United Kingdom provided that it is performed by a veterinarian and also largely legal in the USA (Bennett & Perini 2003a).

After tail docking was banned in the European Union in 1998, the ban was proposed and endorsed by the World Veterinary Association and the World Organisation for Animal Health and national veterinary organisations. The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons considers docking of dogs’ tails to be an unjustified mutilation and unethical unless done for therapeutic or acceptable prophylactic reasons (Hughes 1998). The World Small Animal Veterinary Association (2001), The American Veterinary Medical Association (2005), Canadian Veterinary Medical Association (2005) indicate that aesthetic tail docking is not medically beneficial and behaviourally harmful and unnecessary and they all carry out studies along with these opinions.

Today, many countries ban cropping and docking because they consider the practices unnecessary, painful, and cruel or mutilation. In Europe, the cropping of ears is prohibited in all countries that have ratified the European Convention for the Protection of Pet Animals. Some countries that ratified the convention made exceptions for tail docking. Tail docking has been banned completely in a number of countries including the Austria, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Cyprus, Scotland, Switzerland, Luxembourg, Finland, Italy, Germany, Poland and Slovenia etc. (Table 1). In France, Hungary, Portugal and Serbia, it is still permitted. In Germany, tail docking was prohibited in 2006 but it is still permitted for medical reasons (with veterinary justification) and for some gundog breeds (Lefebvre et al. 2007). Czech Republic allows tail docking without anaesthesia only in pups younger than eight days. Operations are implemented within foreseen time periods by authorised personnel (Quartarone et al. 2012). In Spain, docking is still performed because the national law permits mutilations for breed standard requirements. Non-therapeutic tail docking and ear cropping are banned in some sections of Spain (Houp et al. 2007).

The Animal Welfare Act 2006 banned tail docking in England and Wales other than for medical reasons and
with exemptions for certain types of working dog (Hunt, Spaniel and Terrier). It also became illegal to show dogs docked on or after the commencement of the Act (6th April 2007 in England/28th March 2007 in Wales) at events where members of the public pay to enter. An exemption was granted for dogs that are demonstrating their working ability only (Delafenêtre 2010; Animal Welfare Foundation Guidance 2013). The exemption allows certain types of working dog to have their tails docked by a veterinary surgeon. The dog has to be no more than five days old and the veterinary surgeon must certify that he or she has seen evidence that the dog is likely to work in one of the specified areas (Diesel et al. 2010). A statement must also be made to prove that the dog is intended to work in one of the specified areas (e.g. shooting, pest control, emergency rescue, armed forces, police), as described in “The Docking of Working Dogs’ Tails (England) Regulations” (2007). Similar legislation has also been passed in Northern Ireland with some variation in the detail of exemption (Welfare of Animals Regulations 2012).

In Europe, ears of pups are cropped based on breed and health conditions when the pups are 6–12 weeks of age. However, European Union has not drafted any directives and regulations about tail docking, ear cropping and other convenience surgical operations. The bans on these operations exist only in a “The European Convention for the Protection of Pet Animals” (ETS No. 125) which is an International Agreement of European Council (Sozer 2007). Turkey signed this agreement on 18 November 1999 and put into force on 24 June 2004. According to 5199 numbered Protection of Animals Act (2004), surgical operations to alter the appearance of domestic pets and other non-therapeutic operations of tail docking and ear cropping are banned. However, an exemption was made for non-therapeutic operations approved by a veterinarian for medical purposes and for the benefit of a specific animal.

## Conclusions

The authors could not find evidence-based supporting studies that show a welfare benefit of ear cropping or tail docking of dogs, nor could they construct logical reasons to support this practice. Therefore, aesthetical or traditional reasons do not justify the pain and distress that are caused by the procedure. Next to pain, tail docking hinders effective inter-dog communication to a certain degree. Furthermore, dogs need their tails for balance and support. Although banned by law in Turkey, ear cropping and tail docking are still practised by both some veterinarians and breeders. This fact makes clear that it is necessary to change the mentality of a sub group of veterinarians. In order to be perceived as caring professionals and guardians of animal welfare and veterinary societies, proficient veterinaries should refrain from tail docking and ear cropping. Only than the veterinary profession as a whole can show their responsibility, ethics conduct and deontological attitude. Furthermore, greater public awareness must be created by educating pet owners about welfare aspects and the impact on health of these practices.

## Disclosure statement

The authors report no conflicts of interest. The authors alone are responsible for the content and writing of this article.

## References

American Veterinary Medical Association. 2005. [Internet]. [cited 2015 May 15]. Available from: https://www.avma.org/News/JAVMANews/Pages/081215c.aspx

Animal Welfare Foundation Guidance. 2013. The practical and legal approach to the docked puppy [Internet]. [cited 2015 Feb 25]. Available from: http://www.bva-awf.org.uk

| Country       | Banned | Exceptions                  | Ban/restriction date |
|---------------|--------|-----------------------------|----------------------|
| Austria       | Yes    | Some dog breeds             | 2005                 |
| Belgium       | Yes    |                             | 2006                 |
| Bosnia        | Restricted | Can only be done vets | 2009                 |
| Bulgaria      | Yes    |                             | 2005                 |
| Croatia       | Yes    |                             | 2006                 |
| Cyprus        | Yes    |                             | 2001                 |
| Czech Rep.    | Restricted | Older than 8 days | 1992                 |
| Denmark       | Yes    | Some gundog breeds         | 1996                 |
| Estonia       | Yes    |                             | 2000                 |
| Finland       | Yes    |                             | 1996                 |
| France        | No     |                             | –                    |
| Germany       | Yes    | Some gundog breeds         | 2006                 |
| Greece        | Yes    |                             | 1991                 |
| Hungary       | No     |                             | –                    |
| Iceland       | Yes    |                             | 2001                 |
| Ireland       | Yes    |                             | 2014                 |
| Italy         | Yes    |                             | 2010                 |
| Latvia        | Yes    | Some dog breeds             | 2010                 |
| Lithuania     | Yes    |                             | 2012                 |
| Luxembourg    | Yes    |                             | 1991                 |
| Netherlands   | Yes    |                             | 2001                 |
| North Ireland | Yes    | Some dog breeds             | 2011                 |
| Norway        | Yes    |                             | 1987                 |
| Poland        | Yes    |                             | 2003                 |
| Portugal      | No     |                             | –                    |
| Romania       | Yes    |                             | 2001                 |
| Scotland      | Yes    |                             | 2006                 |
| Serbia        | No     |                             | –                    |
| Slovakia      | Yes    |                             | 2003                 |
| Slovenia      | Yes    |                             | 2007                 |
| Spain         | Part   |                             | 2007                 |
| Sweden        | Yes    |                             | 1989                 |
| Switzerland   | Yes    |                             | 1988                 |
| Turkey        | Yes    |                             | 2004                 |
| England       | Yes    | Some working dog breeds    | 2006                 |
Sozer SM. 2007. Hayvan hakları mevzuati. Ankara: Turkey: Adalet Yayinevi.
Sutherland MA, Tucker CB. 2011. The long and short of it: a review of tail docking in farm animals. Appl Anim Behav Sci. 135:179–191.
Wada N, Hori H, Tokuriki M. 1993. Electromyographic and kinematic studies of tail movements in dogs during treadmill locomotion. J Morphol. 217:105–113.
Wansborough RK. 1996. Cosmetic tail docking of dogs. Aust Vet J. 74:59–63.
Webster AJF. 1998. What use is science to animal welfare? Naturwissenschaften. 85:262–269.
Welfare of Animals Regulations. 2012. Official Journal of the Northern Ireland no: 387 (Docking of Working Dogs’ Tails and Miscellaneous Amendments) [Internet]. [cited 2015 May 14]. Available from: http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nidsr/2012/9780337988134
World Small Animal Veterinary Association. 2001. WSAVA Tail Docking Position Statement [Internet]. [cited 2015 Apr 18]. Available from: www.wsava.org/taildock.htm
Yilmaz G, Gurakan B, Saatci Ü. 2002. Topuk kani alimna sonrası bebeklerin aglama surelerine etki eden faktorler. Çocuk Sağ Hast Derg. 45:232–236.
Yilmaz O. 2008. Kangal Türk Çoban Köpeği. İstanbul: Bilge Kültür Sanat Publishing.
Yilmaz O. 2013. Türk Kangal çoban köpeği ile tarihe nostaljik bir yolculuk. Türk Düny Tar Derg. 53:45–52.