

URC RESEARCH REPORT

Name of Researcher: Arnja Dale

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Project Title: An Investigation into the Success of In-Clinic Animal Behaviour Therapy

1. What is(are) the research question(s)?

The aims of this research are to:

1. Identify canine behavioural problems seen by New Zealand's only veterinary referral service, the Unitec Animal Behaviour Centre.
2. Quantify the associated treatment success.
3. Identify owner compliance.
4. Quantify the effectiveness of behavioural plans.

2. Rationale

Applied animal behaviour science is an important and fast growing field, although it is hampered by a lack of research into scientifically based approaches that explore the effectiveness of behaviour modification of companion animals despite dogs and cats being the most commonly owned companion animal worldwide. When an animal develops problem behaviour it is commonly an ethical and an animal welfare issue. Many animals are euthanised due to various forms of problem behaviour, especially relating to aggression. However, the animals that are not euthanised may endure prolonged levels of poor welfare whilst their owners may experience considerable inconvenience and stress. The ultimate goal of professionals working in the field of companion animal behaviour is to increase knowledge and understanding of behaviour problems in companion animals, and to decrease their prevalence through prevention, development of reliable diagnostic methods and effective treatment programmes.

Dog bites to people and other animals represent a serious public health concern. Responsible owners may prevent or reduce the number of dog bite incidences if they can recognise potentially dangerous situations. Therefore, owner understanding of the potential risk their dog's aggression may pose, is an area of necessary investigation.

The Unitec Animal Behaviour Clinic most commonly deals with veterinarian referred cases of aggression in dogs. In order to properly assess the effectiveness of behavioural advice and behaviour modification, it is important to obtain feedback from clients on therapy success and failure, their level of compliance with the animal behaviour treatment advice and their understanding of the risks of owning and aggressive dog.

While client-feedback obtained on animal behaviour therapy success has been published by behaviour consultants overseas (Cameron, 1997; Askew, 1996; Yeon, 1999; Galac and Knol, 1997; Blackshaw, 1991; Sherman *et al.*, 1996; Beaver, 1983; Houpt, 1983), these articles report on informal follow-up rather than rigorous scientific investigation of treatment plans and their success.

The importance of owner compliance is mentioned in many discussions of behaviour therapy protocols and therapy efficacy (Takeuchi *et al.*, 2000; Overall, 1993; Overall, 1997a, Askew, 1996). In a study of canine aggression it was found that client compliance and extent of client effort was the biggest single determinant of therapy success (Takeuchi

et al., 2001). An in-depth investigation of New Zealand data will be a timely boost to the body of knowledge in New Zealand.

Animal behavioural problems are of welfare concern both to the animal and the owners. The effectiveness of treatment and owner compliance is pertinent to the development of reliable diagnostic methods and effective treatment programmes. The Dog Control Act has been amended by Parliament six times since its enactment in 1996, however, dog bite statistics have remained relatively static. Research into the potential methods of reducing human directed dog aggression is long overdue in New Zealand. Human directed dog aggression is the number one animal behaviour problem seen by the consultants at the Unitec Animal Behaviour Centre.

We aim, through a questionnaire completed by the client (or by the animal behaviour consultation during a telephone interview), as part of a larger study, to explore client views regarding canine behavioural treatment success, their compliance with the treatment advice and their understanding of the risks of owning an aggressive dog.

3. Methodology

Participants were drawn from the Animal Behaviour Clinic Client Database. 15 clients were selected from all those who presented a dog, to the Animal Behaviour Clinic, displaying aggressive behaviours and that met the criteria for our research (over the past 24 months). Our sample size is consistent with numbers used in previous published research by Notari & Gallicchio (2008). Each selected client was offered the opportunity to complete a questionnaire, or if they preferred, a telephone conversation based on the questionnaire was held with one of the animal behaviour consultants. A letter of introduction about research aims and objectives, the questionnaire, and a consent form with a self addressed return envelope was sent out. Questionnaire completion was voluntary and confidential and declining will in no way affected the client's relationship with the Unitec Behaviour Clinic or the current treatment plan being undertaken and took approximately 15 minutes. Data analysis consisted of statistical analysis using SPSS.

4. Outcomes / findings

Only a third of respondents consistently implemented the advice given by the Animal Behaviour Centre (n=5) and thus had success in terms of reducing the amount of aggression displayed by their dogs. Eight of the ten remaining respondents were not consistently implementing the advice due to lack of time, too much effort and a lack understanding of the dangers of owning an aggressive dog. This resulted in these dogs either still displaying the same level of aggression or it only being reduced slightly. The remaining two dogs had been euthanized due to the respondents not following the advice provided by the Animal Behaviour Centre to muzzle their dog in public situation. Both of these dogs showed aggression in the form of a bite and were subsequently euthanised. Respondents of dogs that displayed aggression towards humans, and in particular children, were much more concerned about their dog's aggression than respondents that had dogs that displayed aggression towards other dogs. All respondents reported that having an aggressive dog is very stressful, embarrassing and stated that it lowered their quality of life. No respondents fully understood the implication of the Dog Control Act 1996 and the associated penalties that can be imposed.

5. Publications and dissemination

A publication in a trade journal and a peer reviewed journal article in a journal such as Applied Animal Behaviour Science, Anthrozoology or the Journal of Applied Animal Welfare is currently in preparation. These will be forwarded to the Unitec Research Office once in print.