



MEETING	Advisory Committee
DATE	25 September 2008
TITLE	Meeting with the Kennel Club on the removal of dew claws
CLASSIFICATION	Unclassified
SUMMARY	The Kennel Club requested a meeting with RCVS following the publication of the RCVS advice note on the removal of dew claws
DECISIONS REQUIRED	NONE – for report
ATTACHMENTS	NONE
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**NOTE OF A MEETING WITH THE KENNEL CLUB
HELD ON 9 SEPTEMBER 2009 AT 3 P.M. AT BELGRAVIA HOUSE**

RCVS ADVICE NOTE ON THE REMOVAL OF DEW CLAWS

PRESENT:

Mrs Caroline Kisko, Kennel Club Secretary
Ms Holly Lee, Public Affairs Manager, The Kennel Club
Professor Sheila Crispin RCVS
Dr Jerry Davies RCVS

IN ATTENDANCE:

Mrs Sue Whall, Advisory Manager, Professional Conduct Department

1. The meeting was arranged at the request of Mrs Caroline Kisko by letter of 9 June 2008 in response to the publication in March 2008 of the RCVS advice note on the removal of dew claws attached as Annex A.
2. The Kennel Club (KC) provided its definition of dew claws as follows;

'Dew Claw: Fifth digit on the inside (sic) pastern. Most breeds do not have rear dew claws but some breeds require double rear dew claws (e.g. Briard, Pyrenean Mountain Dog) and the Italian Spinone has single rear dew claws'.
3. In addition, KC raised the point that as there is no legal definition of dew claws, KC was concerned that in a court of law, based on the advice from both the RCVS and the KC, a judgement in a mutilation case involving the removal of the first digit of the fore limb would be difficult to make.
4. To support its argument that anatomists used the term 'dew claw' to include the first digit of the fore limb, the KC'S view was that it is not possible for RCVS to make a judgement that dew claws are found only on the hind limb. References relied upon by the KC were DYCE SACK & WENSING - Veterinary Anatomy 3 Edition p 459 and BSAVA 1989 - An Introduction to Veterinary Anatomy and Physiology p 174.
5. The view put forward by RCVS is that in the absence of a legal definition of 'dew claw', there was justification for relying on the anatomical view contained in Miller's Anatomy of the Dog. It was important that by removing the first digit of the fore limb, veterinary surgeons were aware that they could potentially be at risk of carrying out a mutilation that was not permitted under the Regulations. Professor Crispin and Dr Davies agreed it was probable a member asked to provide an expert opinion in court would rely on Miller's Anatomy of the Dog. Professor Crispin circulated a paper written by Professor Emeritus I A Silver FRCVS attached as Annex B.

6. CK explained the KC would not be altering its advice, although it may modify its definition because it is inaccurate as it stands.
7. CK was concerned that the wording of the RCVS advice note stating; 'The removal of the first digit of the fore limb is justified only, if in the veterinary surgeon's professional opinion, the particular anatomy/appearance of the digits invites possible damage'. The KC believed the advice note should allow the removal of the first digit of the forelimb on the reasonable request of the owner.
8. CK raised a further point relating to her concern for the welfare of those dogs whose claws on the front first of the fore limb overgrow and penetrate soft tissue so as to cause pain. She was concerned that not all owners would realise that these claws needed trimming.
9. Professor Crispin explained that this was a rare complication, especially if dogs were given sufficient exercise. If the claw on a dog's front first digit did overgrow, then the owner should ensure it is trimmed.
10. Professor Crispin said it was a not a valid argument on which to support the removal of the first digit of the fore limb. Dr Davies added that the number of dogs whose claws grow round as described by CK would be few and would not justify the automatic removal of the digit. CK advised that she had 23 dogs, one of which had a first digit that grew round which required regular clipping.
11. There was some discussion on the use of the first digit of the forelimb. Both Professor Crispin and Dr Davies provided examples of dogs that used these digits as 'thumbs'. CK advised all her dogs use them 'to corner' when running at speed. However, in their professional capacity, CK believed that veterinary surgeons should consider a request from a breeder/client and that by refusing to remove the first digits of the fore limb, veterinary surgeons were pushing non-veterinary surgeons to carry out the procedure themselves, provided the puppy's eyes have not opened.
12. CK also stated that in her experience, older, more experienced veterinary surgeons were more likely to remove the first digits of the fore limbs than new graduates. Dr Davies explained that being older and more experienced did not necessarily make a veterinary surgeon right. Things move on with increased knowledge. This was particularly so in the understanding of the perception of pain and the need for analgesia.
13. Professor Crispin was concerned that a time course for removal of dew claws based on when a puppy's eyes opened added to the uncertainties, as the eyes may be open at birth, or at any time for some 13 days after birth. It was preferable to remove the dew claws before the puppy's reach 5 days of age as expressed in the RCVS advice note.

The meeting ended at approximately 3:45 p.m.

Annex A

ADVICE NOTE 16

THE REMOVAL OF DEW CLAWS

Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966

1. The removal of dew claws amounts to the practice of veterinary surgery and therefore can, as a general rule, only be carried out by a veterinary surgeon. Schedule 3 to the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966, however, allows anyone of or over the age of 18 to amputate the dew claws of a dog, before its eyes are open.
2. The Veterinary Surgeons Act applies to the United Kingdom (England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland).

Animal Welfare Legislation

3. In England, Scotland and Wales the animal welfare legislation prohibits the mutilation of animals, but subject to certain exceptions laid down in regulations.

Animal Welfare Act 2006

4. In England, Schedules 1 and 9 to the Mutilations (Permitted Procedures) (England) Regulations 2007 (SI 2007/1100) state that the removal of dew claws is a permitted procedure with the condition that 'an anaesthetic must be administered except where the dog is a puppy whose eyes have not yet opened'.
5. In Wales, Schedules 1 and 9 to the Mutilations (Permitted Procedures) (Wales) Regulations 2007 (SI 2007/1029) state that the removal of dew claws is a permitted procedure with the condition that 'an anaesthetic must be administered except where the dog is a puppy whose eyes have not yet opened'

Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006

6. In Scotland, Schedule 9 of the Prohibited Procedures on Protected Animals (Exemptions) (Scotland) Regulations 2007 (SI 2007/256) states that the amputation of dew claws is an exempted procedure and may be carried out for the purpose of general animal management. The Protection of Animals (Anaesthetic) Act 1954 continues to apply in Scotland and provides that anaesthetic must be administered except for 'the amputation of the dew claws of a dog before its eyes are open'.

What are a dog's dew claws?

7. Colloquially, dew claw refers to the first digit on the hind limb and the first digit on the fore limb.

8. Anatomically, the dew claw is defined as the first digit of the hind limb. Dew claws (hind limb) are very variable in their occurrence, ranging from complete absence to a fully formed digit with skeletal components; most consist of a nail, skin and connective tissue with no skeletal articulation. Such a vestigial structure is certainly very vulnerable to damage through catching on vegetation; therefore, there is a good argument for removal of dew claws before five days of age.

9. Anatomically, the first digit of the fore limb is not a dew claw. Generally, the first digit of the fore limb is fully formed and has an important function. Not surprisingly dogs are often seen to use these ' thumbs ' exactly as you would expect – to help grasp food and other objects. Generally, the first digits of the fore limb rarely 'get caught' because they can be adducted, flexed or extended like any other digit, due to the bony articulation and the muscle attachments.

10. Legislation has not defined dew claws and ultimately, it is for the courts to decide the meaning of dew claws applying to any specific legislation.

Conclusion

11. The removal of the first digit of the hind limb (true dew claws) is justified in most circumstances.

12. The removal of first digit of the fore limb is justified only if, in the veterinary surgeon's professional opinion, the particular anatomy/appearance of the digits invites possible damage.

Dewclaws

The information below was compiled from standard Veterinary Anatomy textbooks e.g. Chauvaux (1891); Montane et al (1953); Popesko (1962); Sisson and Grossman (1989); Pasquini et al (1989); Nickel et al (1993); Miller (1995); Boyd (2001); Dyce et al (2002) supplemented by my own observations over more than 60 years.

“Dewclaw” is the common name given to non-weight-bearing toes of some mammals such as dogs, cats, pigs, cattle and small ruminants. In carnivores the so-called dewclaws are the *first* digits of the fore and hind feet, while in ruminants and pigs they are the *second and fifth* digits. The dewclaws of carnivores are the equivalents of the thumb and big toe in humans. These digits differ from the other four in each foot in being composed of two instead of three bones (phalanges). It can be argued that only the dewclaws of the hind feet are true “dewclaws” because they lack a bony attachment to the limb skeleton. “Dewclaw” is not a scientifically defined term and historically was applied only to those of the hind feet.

In dogs the dewclaws of the **fore limb** lie on the inner (medial) aspect of the fore feet and are attached to the carpus (the wrist joint of humans) by a separate small metacarpal bone that articulates (forms a joint) with the most medial bone of the lowest (distal) row of carpal bones. The dewclaws have their own nerves, blood supply, muscles and tendons like those of the other digits and can be moved voluntarily by the dog in the same way as the other digits. The degree of mobility varies greatly among individuals. Some dogs hold hard objects (sticks, bones etc) between their forelimbs and employ the dewclaws as part of the gripping mechanism, which keeps the object steady while they chew it.

Like the other claws, the dewclaw is covered with a constantly-growing horny sheath that is normally worn away by wear and tear at the same rate as it grows. In dogs that are confined in domestic surroundings, exercised minimally and not properly cared for, the horn on the dewclaws (like the horn on the other digits) may not be worn away and can become excessively long. Because the claws are curved, the elongated horn grows in a circle or spiral. This can have two deleterious effects: 1) when both horny claws have reached a C shape they may catch each other as the forelegs move back and forth, with the result that one or both claws may be torn, or 2) if the horn grows enough to form a complete circle or spiral, the tip may press against the inside of the leg to which it is attached and penetrate or abrade the skin.

The **hind limb** dewclaws in dogs normally lack any direct bony connection to the hock joint (tarsus – the ankle in humans) through the first metatarsal, because this bone is reduced to a very small, pea-like addition to the tarsus, and does not articulate with the proximal bone of the first digit. However their position on the medial aspect of the foot and the structure of the digits themselves, are the same as in forelimb, with two small bones, the end one being covered with a horny sheath. The whole claw is suspended from and held in place only by its attachment to the skin and subcutaneous connective tissue of the medial aspect (inside) of the hind foot. There are the same nerves and blood vessels as in the forelimb but only vestigial muscles or tendons. In some breeds such as the Pyrenean Mountain and the Briard the dewclaws of the hind legs are duplicated owing to a genetic anomaly that produces a distortion of the

Apical Epidermal Ridge in the embryo. The double dewclaws of St Bernards were prized by the monks because they are thought to give the dogs greater traction in soft snow (see Saturday Review, 15 p626,1884).

Because the hind dewclaws have been regarded merely as rather fragile skin protuberance, they are generally considered to be more prone to damage than those of the forelimb - but see note above re St Bernards.

Removal of Dewclaws

Removal of dewclaws soon after birth is a commonly practised mutilation. It seems to be generally believed that the hind dewclaws, if left intact, are at serious risk of injury, but so far as I am aware there is no scientific (statistical) evidence to support this belief. Similarly it appears to be widely held that the hind dewclaws are more vulnerable than those on the forelimbs. However, those breeds which have double hind dewclaws, and therefore one would think might be at the greatest risk of injury to these organs, are never subjected to dewclaw removal, and apparently survive quite happily without constant veterinary attention.

Sensitivity to pain is an important factor that needs to be considered in relation to the removal of dewclaws. There is a reassuring and convenient belief, widely disseminated among both lay and professional people, that very young creatures do not suffer so much pain as older ones. It is therefore somehow ethically acceptable to operate without anaesthesia on young, but not older sentient creatures. The basis of this belief is probably founded on nothing more than the observation that, with the exception of little piglets, and to a lesser extent human babies, very young creatures cannot make very loud protests when injured.

There is, fortunately, good anatomical and physiological evidence that neural synaptic connections and myelination of ascending nerve tracts (which convey pain sensation to the brain) are incomplete at birth in some species, but we do not know if *appreciation* of acute pain is actually less in neonates than later in life. However, we do know that maturation of the brain occurs very rapidly in most short-lived animals, especially when there is sensory input from the eyes. Minor operations without anaesthetic, if absolutely necessary, should therefore be carried out *before* the eyes of nesting neonates like puppies, are open. Since the eyes do not invariably open on a certain post natal day, although 10 days is the commonly stated time for puppies, any defined age before which the removal of dewclaws is permitted without anaesthesia, should be less than 5 days after birth. This because the fifth postnatal day appears to be the earliest date on which the eyelids begin to separate.

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