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Tail docking, or tail shortening or banding as some refer to it, is a procedure that is performed on puppies of certain breeds (or types) up to four days of age to remove their tails³. All dogs are born with their tails intact. As a dog-loving nation we are certainly used to seeing these breeds without their tails, but should a painful and unnecessary procedure be continued simply to “improve” the cosmetic appearance of these breeds? The New Zealand veterinary profession doesn’t think so, and there are many good reasons why.

New Zealand is one of the few first-world countries left that allows tail docking of dogs. This makes us vulnerable to welfare abuse as breeders from overseas import pregnant bitches to whelp in New Zealand, dock the puppies’ tails within the first four days of age and then export the bitch and puppies once the puppies are old enough. This damages New Zealand’s animal welfare reputation internationally, as well as increasing the biosecurity risk associated with unnecessary import and export of live animals.

Veterinarians have chosen as a profession to strongly discourage tail docking dogs because we believe it’s an unnecessary cosmetic procedure that can cause unnecessary pain and suffering and has no proven welfare benefits to the affected dogs. It is contrary to the Veterinary Code of Professional Conduct².

There is New Zealand research to show that at least 100 dogs’ tails would have to be amputated to prevent just one tail injury. It also shows that the vast majority of tail injuries are able to be fixed with a single visit to a veterinarian¹.

Tail banding, as currently allowed under the Animal Welfare Act, must be performed by a person who possesses the appropriate knowledge, training and competency necessary to do so effectively, and who is acting under a documented quality assurance scheme that assures compliance with this minimum standard³. Currently the New Zealand Council of Docked Breeds administers their own scheme for the New Zealand Kennel Club, but there is no training scheme in New Zealand to ensure everyone performing tail docking can meet the required criteria, and there’s no formal welfare organisation responsible for auditing the process or people/organisations involved, bringing in to question the effectiveness of the Act.

Tail docking involves the removal of significant tissue and cutting through bone. It is a significant surgical procedure and should only be performed by a veterinarian, and only for genuine medical reasons rather than cosmetic⁴.

A dog’s tail is its means of communication as part of its body language. It is a common, though often subconscious, method of humans understanding the intent and mood of a dog. The presence of the tail is no impediment to the athletic ability of the dog. We could liken this to prophylactic leg amputations to avoid cruciate injury, a common injury to both dogs and humans – presumably this would not be agreeable to many.

The suggested reduction in the breeding and showing (and suggested economic flow on effects) of these dogs should not be an impediment to outlawing a dated and painful procedure. The cost of prohibition is worth the price to stop cosmetic disfigurement of dogs.

Common sense also dictates that pups do feel pain and that banding is not a painless procedure. Tie a rubber band around your finger tightly for five minutes while you consider this statement.

References

1. Wells, A: Tail docking in dogs: A retrospective study into the causes, treatments and risk factors of canine tail injuries in New Zealand. Masters Thesis, Massey University, Palmerston North, NZ 2013
2. NZ Veterinary Code of Professional Conduct, Section 6f explanatory notes <http://www.vetcouncil.org.nz/CPC/index.php>
3. Animal Welfare Act 1999 Animal Welfare (Dogs) Code of Welfare (2010) (<http://www.biosecurity.govt.nz/files/regs/animal-welfare/req/codes/dogs/dogs-code-of-welfare.pdf>)
4. NZVA Tail Docking of Dogs policy 9 Feb 2011 <http://www.nzva.org.nz/policies/surgical-alteration-natural-state-animals>