

## No conviction for pair who chopped off puppies' tails with knife

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Two people who illegally chopped off puppies' tails with a knife have escaped a criminal conviction.

Rebecca Douglas, 28, an aspiring vet technician, and publican Malcolm West, 43, were found guilty of causing three-day-old puppies unnecessary or unreasonable pain or distress by docking their tails with a hot knife.

For centuries, tail docking has been a popular method of removing dog's tails for aesthetic, hygienic, or safety reasons. But it's been banned in many countries, and is now mostly outlawed in New Zealand.

Tails can now only be docked surgically by a veterinarian for the dog's health, or cut off using a band by someone approved by the New Zealand Kennel Club (NZKC).

Miss Douglas, from Sheffield in rural Canterbury, was found guilty of using a hot knife to cut off the tails of five newborn Jack Russell puppies.

Her friend, Mr West, 43, the proprietor and manager of nearby Springfield Hotel, was found guilty of helping her by holding the puppies down.

While she admitted to SPCA officers that the puppies "eeked a little" during the procedure, she didn't think they felt anything.

"I am the last person on earth who would do anything to hurt an animal," she said in a statement.

"I would never have become involved if I believed the puppies could feel anything. I still don't think they did."

Miss West, a lifelong dog lover, had "no idea" the practise was banned.

Last month, Judge Noel Walsh found the pair guilty of the SPCA charges brought under the Animal Welfare Act after hearing evidence at Christchurch District Court.

Defence counsel for the pair, Paul Norcross and Judith Walshe, sought for them to be discharged without conviction.

The central issue of the case was whether days-old puppies could feel pain.

**The Crown argued that tail docking was an unnecessary mutilation.**

Judge Walsh today (Wed) accepted that was the only balanced outcome for offending which he deemed to be at the lower end of the scale.

It was offending "borne more out of ignorance, rather than to cause pain to the puppies", he said.

Criminal convictions would have affected Miss Douglas' attempts to train as a veterinary technician at Otago Polytechnic, the judge said, while it could have affected Mr West's ability to retain his liquor licence.

"The consequences of convictions for the pair would be disproportionate to the gravity of offending," Judge Walsh ruled.

He described them as ordinarily, decent, hard working people, who were upstanding citizens in their rural Canterbury community.

Their crimes were not malicious and they obviously adored the animals.

He ordered them to pay \$800 each outwards the SPCA's costs of bringing the prosecution, as well as \$500 each for expenses of expert witnesses who gave testimony at the hearing.

The New Zealand Council of Docked Breeds said dogowners need to be educated on the issue of tail docking, which it claims is "widespread".

"There are a lot worse cases out there than these two people," said spokeswoman Lesley Chalmers, who has banded puppy tails for 40 years.

"You just need to look at dogs being sold on Trade Me that are not pedigree pups and have been docked.

"There's provision there to deal with these people who could be acting cruelly, and not enough is being done."

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