The issue of dog aggression and how it affects society highlights that the wellbeing of animals, humans and the environment is inseparable. Dog aggression is responsible for a significant public health burden in New Zealand and the veterinary profession’s deep understanding of dogs and how society and dogs interact is the foundation for the NZVA Proposed Dog Control Framework.

The NZVA Dangerous Dog Position Statement from 2014 was recently reviewed by CAV and expanded into a position description. Professor Kevin Stafford and Doctor Elsa Flint also contributed their expertise to this review providing valuable perspectives and opinions.

The review was initiated after the spate of dog attacks reported in the media earlier this year and the realisation that we needed to approach this problem from a fresh perspective, as our previous efforts and approach to the problem has failed to make any real difference. It quickly became apparent that although this was labelled a “dog issue”, it actually was a much wider issue that involving owners, breeders, lawmakers, enforcement agencies, media and medical professionals too.

Out of this review process emerged a framework that seeks to comprehensively address the many facets of the complex issue of dog aggression. Veterinarians are well positioned to lead the call for ‘changes to dog control legislation’ and ‘society's attitudes to dog ownership’ due to their knowledge and unique perspective on the interactions of people, dogs and society.

The recommendations from the NZVA Dangerous Dog Position Description are summarised under six key areas:

**Review the classification system used to manage aggressive dogs.**

New Zealand currently uses breed-specific legislation (BSL) to classify dogs as menacing based on their breed or type. BSL has not been a reliable tool when used overseas to reduce incidences of dog attacks, and it has now been reversed by three European governments
and many US administrations following studies that have shown it to have no scientific basis.

Aggressive behaviour in dogs can be encouraged by an owner in any number of large powerful breeds of dogs. The breed correlations seen in dog bite statistics may actually be reflecting the owner’s behaviour as the underlying causal factor (American Veterinary Medical Association Animal Welfare Division, 2014).

By focusing on a certain type or breed of dog, the legislation fails to capture and manage large numbers of problem dogs. It also wastes resources on managing docile members of the target breeds.

The NZVA has proposed an alternative classification system based on that recommended by the Australian Veterinary Association. The alternative system classifies dogs based on their actions as well as the owner’s intention for owning a dog. It aims to identify aggressive dogs earlier and move them to a rehabilitation pathway where appropriate.

**Owner Licensing**

The responsibility to control and improve the dangerous dog situation largely belongs at the other end of the leash - in the hands of its owner.

Dog ownership is a privilege and all owners should be aware of the responsibilities associated with dog ownership. To support this shift in attitude, the NZVA is calling for owners to be licensed before obtaining a dog. This ensures that all dog owners will receive education on dog ownership and understand what that responsibility entails. Existing owners of dogs older than two years of age, with no dog-related incidents on their record would automatically be grandfathered into the scheme.

While we understand that individuals may resent an increased hurdle to dog ownership, we believe that this will be mitigated by the significantly reduced public risk by promoting responsible attitudes towards dog ownership. Licensing owners will serve the wider community by reducing the personal and financial costs associated with dog aggression.

All owners of dogs that are classified as dangerous, potentially dangerous or who obtain dogs for the purpose of guarding or hunting would be required to obtain an endorsement to their license that allows them to own a classified dog.

The endorsement would require that owners:

- are over eighteen years of age
- are tested for their mental and physical abilities to handle the dog safely
• are subject to a criminal background check
• have the support from those who are living with them, and
• have facilities that allow such a dog to be restrained at home and not be a danger to visitors.

Managing unwanted and stray dog populations

Addressing the stray and unwanted dog issue must occur in tandem with any measures to manage dangerous dogs. Dogs must not be easily replaced without full consideration given to the responsibility the dog ownership entails.

To this end, the NZVA is also calling for regulation of dog breeding. Owners of dogs capable of breeding should be required to hold a specific permit issued by the territorial authority. Neutering non-breeding dogs and permanently identifying all dogs is also paramount to the success of this strategy.

Education

Education is an important component of the NZVA’s proposed framework. Veterinarians have a major role to play here as the professionals that are best placed to detect problem behaviour and give advice on how to effectively manage it. They also influence the attitudes of dog owners and can support them during the crucial stages of puppy training.

Education also extends to those who don’t own dogs. People need to understand how to safely interact with dogs and read their body language to understand cues that are given before dogs become overtly aggressive. Adults who care for children must also be educated to understand the importance of supervising children around dogs.

Enforcement

Animal control officers need to be further empowered and supported to allow them to apply the powers granted to them under this legislation with rigor within their territorial authority. The legislation should also support a consistent nationwide approach to dog control.
Data collection

Reporting on dog bites from the medical profession and territorial authorities in a standardised manner will allow collection of data to help us to further understand the issue and monitor the effectiveness of measures introduced to manage the problem.

What we want to achieve

In formulating dog control policy and legislation, consideration must be given to what society expects of a dog. Normal dog behaviour of rushing, jumping, growling and barking may be frightening to some. To eliminate this entirely would only be achieved by banning all dogs, which ignores the numerous positive societal aspects of dog ownership.

The goal of the NZVA is to strike a balance between ensuring that New Zealand society continues to safely enjoy the benefits of having dogs in our lives, as well as ensuring the dogs’ wellbeing. This will be achieved when New Zealand society generally gains a deeper understanding of normal dog behaviour and dog owners specifically appreciate the responsibility that rests with them to appropriately raise and care for their dogs.