Causes of loss or retirement from active duty for New Zealand police German shepherd dogs

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to determine the causes of loss from active duty amongst German shepherd dogs in service with the New Zealand Police Dog Section. Current or previous police dog handlers (n = 149) completed a postal survey for each dog they had worked with during their career including their current dog. Causes of loss were categorised as either retirement, euthanasia whilst still in active duty, death from illness/natural causes, or being killed whilst on duty. Of 182 dogs with completed questionnaires, 48 dogs were still in service, leaving 134 that were retired (94), had been euthanased (24), had died (11) or had been killed (5). The mean and median age at loss for all dogs no longer in service was 6.6 years. The nominal age for planned retirement (8 years) was only reached by 40% of dogs. The single most important cause of retirement was the inability to cope with the physical demands of the job (61/94 dogs or 65%). Degenerative musculoskeletal disease was cited as the primary factor in 42/61 of these dogs (69%). When both retired and euthanised dogs where considered together, 27% were retired or euthanased due to back/spinal problems, and a high proportion of these were believed to have involved the lumbo-sacral joint. Greater research efforts should be targeted at identification of the factors that lead to degenerative musculoskeletal and lumbo-sacral disease to determine methods of lowering their incidence in police working dogs. Such research could lead to increasing the average working life and ‘in work’ welfare of a police German shepherd dog in New Zealand.

Keywords: animal welfare, canine, German shepherd, police, retirement, working dog

Introduction

Like many civil enforcement agencies worldwide, the New Zealand (NZ) Police Dog Section (PDS) uses German shepherd dogs (GSDs) for tracking, patrol and apprehension duties. For any service animal there are animal welfare concerns which must be managed. When a service role places an animal at risk of injury or illness such risks need to be identified and actively reduced for the welfare of the dog. In addition, maximising longevity of service is important for the financial viability of the PDS. Approximately NZ$25,000 is invested in breeding and training costs per dog (Inspector Brendon Gibson, NZ PDS, personal communication 2012). It is therefore vital to identify injuries or illnesses that consistently lead to a police dog being withdrawn from active duty. Once identified, management strategies may be undertaken to improve animal welfare and mitigate losses to these causes. Only once accurate data and suitable analysis have been undertaken can suitable strategies to improve the health and welfare of GSD dogs be investigated.

The history of NZ PDS began in 1956 when the then Prime Minister, Sir Sidney Holland, recruited a police sergeant and his dogs from the English County Constabulary of Surrey (http://www.police.govt.nz/service/dogs/history.html). A dog training centre was set up in Trentham, Wellington in conjunction with the Police Training School. Whilst the Police Training School has since been relocated to Porirua (1981), the dog training centre remains at the original site. From those early beginnings the dog unit became well established and training of dogs for specialist police work began. The first drug-detection training course was held in 1976. This event was closely followed by the introduction of explosive detection courses in 1977. More recent developments have seen the introduction of the Armed Offenders Squad dog (1992), Accelerated Detection (1997) and Search and Rescue (1998) courses. There are currently 115 NZ police dog handlers with 90–95 operational dogs and 10–15 in training at any one time.

There are little published data for police dogs on the causes of loss from service. Kippenes and Gondalen (1999) inves-