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Mortality resulting from undesirable behaviours in dogs aged under three years attending primary-care veterinary practices in England

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Abstract

Undesirable behaviours (UBs) are common in dogs and can jeopardise animal and human health, leading to dog abandonment and euthanasia. Dogs exhibiting UBs may have compromised welfare from underlying emotional motivations for the behaviour (eg anxiety) or from the methods used by owners to resolve the problem (eg aversive techniques). The objective of this study was to estimate proportional mortality due to UBs and risk factors for death due to UBs, including death from road traffic accidents, in dogs under three years of age attending primary-care veterinary practices in England from 2009–2014. Cases were identified by searching de-identified electronic patient records from primary-care veterinary practices participating in the VetCompass Programme. The findings highlight that dogs under three years of age are at a proportionately high risk of death due to UBs (33.7%) compared with other specific causes of death (eg gastrointestinal issues: 14.5%). Male dogs had 1.40× the odds of death from UB compared with females. The proportional mortality from UB for male dogs where information on the cause of death was available was 0.41. Neutered dogs had 1.94× the odds of death due to a UB compared with entire dogs. Aggression was the most prevalent UB overall. Veterinarians had recommended referral in 10.3% of cases where dogs died due to exhibiting a UB and had dispensed nutraceutical, pheromone or pharmacological treatment to 3.0% of the UB cases that died. This study shows that undesirable behaviours require better preventive measures and treatment, through further research and education of veterinarians, other professionals within the dog industry and owners.

Keywords: animal welfare, behaviour, canine, epidemiology, euthanasia, VetCompass