

MEDIA RELEASE

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Study shows that “undesirable behaviour” is the highest cause of mortality in dogs in England that die under the age of three

It is estimated that 24% of households in the UK own a dog, with “man’s best friend” offering health and companionship benefits to their human owners. But a recent VetCompass™ study of dogs under the care of primary-care veterinary practices in England that died before three years of age showed that more than a third (33.7%) died because of “undesirable behaviour”.

So what constitutes undesirable behaviour? For the purposes of the study, undesirable behaviour was defined as *“any behavioural attribute that was recorded in the clinical notes and which the owner and/or other people deemed to be unwelcome. ‘Other people’ included veterinarians and nurses, groomers, trainers, anyone in the dog profession and family, friends or strangers that interacted with the dog.”* The most common types included aggression, conflict with other pets, attacking other dogs, uncontrollable, destructive, overly excitable, excessive barking and inappropriate toileting.

The study was carried out by a team of researchers from several veterinary colleges over a five-year period from September 2009 to August 2014. It aimed to identify risk factors for death due to undesirable behaviours, including breed or type, size, sex and age. The study also focussed on characterising the undesirable behaviours recorded and what steps had been taken to address them, sampling 264,259 dogs attending 127 clinics in England. Over the period of the study 474 dogs under the age of three died due to undesirable behaviour, with aggression being the most common behaviour cited.

Previous research has shown that the first eight weeks of a dog’s life are a risk factor for behavioural issues later in life. Dogs sourced from pet shops exhibit increased aggression towards familiar people and dogs sourced from more stressful environments, such as the breeding stock from puppy farms, have been reported to have more problems with training and show more anxiety and fear-related behaviours. The quality of early socialisation is also important as puppies that are exposed to negative incidents are more likely to show aggression later in life.

SCIENCE IN THE SERVICE OF ANIMAL WELFARE



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This study found that dogs under the age of three were most likely to die from an undesirable behaviour compared with other reasons such as a medical condition. Within the dogs that died due to an undesirable behaviour, it was found that the following had higher risk of death: dogs aged 1-3 years of age, males, cross breeds and certain breeds (the Cocker Spaniel, West Highland White Terrier, and Staffordshire Bull Terrier). Furthermore, the study concluded that dogs that exhibit undesirable behaviours are also at risk of compromised welfare, either because of their own underlying emotional motivations for the behaviour (eg anxiety or fear) or because of the ways in which their owners might seek to resolve the problem (eg the use of aversive techniques such as electric shock collars).

Caitlin Boyd, who co-authored the study, whilst she was an MSc Student in Applied Animal Behaviour and Animal Welfare at the Royal (Dick) Veterinary School, Edinburgh, said: *“Our results highlight the importance of owner education regarding dog behaviour and what is natural behaviour for dogs to exhibit. Human perception impacts whether a behaviour is deemed desirable or not. For example, one owner might not mind a dog who digs but a different owner would find it unacceptable. Improved education to enable owners to recognise “normal” healthy behaviour and identify emotional states, such as fear and anxiety, is necessary to improve early reporting of behavioural concerns. Combining this with improved education of the veterinary profession offers opportunity for owners to find appropriate information on sourcing and raising a puppy and guidance concerning the management and potential resolution of undesirable behaviours. It is advised that young puppies are exposed to a complex environment in a controlled manner in order to produce a confident, resilient dog, who can cope with living alongside humans.*

The study was published in the scientific journal *Animal Welfare* by the Universities Federation for Animal Welfare (UFAW).

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Note to editors:

The Universities Federation for Animal Welfare (UFAW) is an internationally recognised, independent scientific and educational animal welfare charity. It works to improve knowledge and understanding of animals' needs in order to achieve high standards of welfare for farm, companion, research, captive wild animals and those with which we interact in the wild.

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Further information

The full paper *Mortality resulting from undesirable behaviours in dogs aged under three years attending primary-care veterinary practices in England* was published in the Universities Federation for Animal Welfare (UFAW) journal *Animal Welfare*. Subscribers to the journal will find this paper in Volume 27 issue 3. The full abstract of the study can be read at UFAW's website <http://www.ufaw.org.uk/the-ufaw-journal/animal-welfare>.

If you wish to read the full paper, you can visit [ingentaconnect.com](http://www.ingentaconnect.com) to access the paper for \$25 (US) plus taxes. <http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/ufaw/aw>

Those purchasing the paper or choosing to subscribe to the *Animal Welfare* journal will be supporting UFAW's work. <http://www.ufaw.org.uk/the-ufaw-journal/subscription-rates>

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