



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE FOR
AGRICULTURE AND
RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

**Welfare of Animals Bill:
Veterinary Northern Ireland**

12 October 2010

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Stephen Moutray (Chairperson)
Mr Roy Beggs (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr P J Bradley
Mr Trevor Clarke
Mr Willie Clarke
Mr Pat Doherty
Mr Simpson Gibson
Mr William Irwin
Mr Francie Molloy
Mr George Savage

Witnesses:

Mr Brian McAuley)
Mr Ian Stewart) Veterinary Northern Ireland
Mr Des Thompson)

The Chairperson (Mr Moutray):

I welcome the witnesses. You are here to give the Committee a presentation on the Welfare of Animals Bill. Start when you are ready.

Mr Des Thompson (Veterinary Northern Ireland):

I thank the Committee for the opportunity to present the views of the Veterinary profession in Northern Ireland on the Welfare of Animals Bill. On qualifying, each veterinary surgeon takes an

oath, part of which states:

“my constant endeavour will be to ensure the welfare of the animals committed to my care.”

I have prepared some bullet points on which I will enlarge. I am accompanied by Brian McAuley, president of the North of Ireland Veterinary Association and Ian Stewart, president of the Association of Veterinary Surgeons Practising in Northern Ireland (AVSPNI). We three have, between us, more than 100 years of veterinary practice experience.

We welcome the Bill as a positive move that will bring Northern Ireland animal welfare issues, particularly those of companion animals and equids, into line with the rest of the UK. The Bill will also provide enabling legislation to improve animal welfare across all species. If passed, the Bill will require relevant secondary legislation to deal with matters that we will highlight. We look forward to working with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) and the Committee on the detail of that secondary legislation.

The inclusion in the Bill of the offence of failing to take whatever measures are required to prevent suffering is a very positive move that enormously improves existing legislation, which requires suffering to have occurred before any legal action can be taken. However, if it is to be properly enforced, the legislation will need to come with enough resources.

Before the Bill was drafted, I and my colleague Brian McAuley made a presentation to the Committee on behalf of the British Veterinary Association (BVA). Our evidence today is on behalf of the profession in Northern Ireland, although we are fully supported by the BVA.

First, I will deal with some issues that arise from the Bill and provide the veterinary perspective on those. I will then provide more detailed evidence on the controversial subject of the tail docking of dogs. I am aware that the Committee has taken a vote on tail docking. With respect, Chairman, we are disappointed that that happened before our evidence on the issue provided members with a wider perspective. Despite that vote, I hope that members will listen to our evidence and use it to make future decisions as the Bill progresses.

The Chairperson:

Is that the sum of your statement?

Mr Thompson:

No, I was just querying that matter. I am happy to wait for an answer to that point until later in the proceedings.

The Chairperson:

The Committee is willing to accept any evidence that you wish to provide in relation to tail docking.

Mr Thompson:

Thank you. We would like to address matters related to the management of animals in distress; the training of inspectors; equine welfare; mutilations in animals; licensing and registration of activities involving animals; welfare codes; and breeding of companion animals — and, of course, tail docking.

Part 3 of the Bill deals with the management of animals in distress. Clause 17(4) gives an inspector or a police officer the authority to destroy an animal when it is not reasonably practicable to wait for a veterinary surgeon. I hope that it is understood that such a course would be taken only in very exceptional circumstances.

Under clause 45, there are a number of stipulations regarding the appointment of inspectors. It states that the council must have regard to guidance issued by the Department. It goes on to say that the Department may draw up a list of suitable personnel. Nowhere does it make any reference to experience, qualifications or training of those personnel. We would like the veterinary profession to be consulted when the Department draws up that guidance.

In relation to equine welfare, regrettably, in the profession, we are aware that the inclement weather last winter created a particular problem for horses, and in previous submissions from the British Veterinary Association your attention was drawn to those problems. The profession in Northern Ireland agrees with the BVA that within legislation there has to be a policing body that is ultimately responsible for taking action in extreme circumstances. It appears that, because the horse is not classified as an agricultural animal, DARD is not officially responsible for equine welfare and does not have the resources to enforce legislation relating to equine welfare. If that is the case, it needs to be addressed in the short term and new legislation should take that on board and provide the required resources.

In relation to injured stray animals, the welfare of cats will always be a problem when the law does not recognise the cat as an animal in road traffic accidents. With new legislation being produced, it would be reasonable to look again at the question of cats in road traffic accidents, because that is a major welfare problem.

The veterinary profession would like to see all mutilations of animals banned except for those detailed in secondary legislation, which may include exemptions set out in the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 1972. There should also be provision to revise those rules when new scientific evidence becomes available. Mutilations are defined as:

“procedures, carried out with or without instruments which involve interference with the sensitive tissues or the bone structure of an animal, and are carried out for non - therapeutic reasons.”

It is important that those provisions are in secondary legislation rather than primary legislation to ensure that adjustments can be made as scientific knowledge is expanded and farm practices evolve.

At present, a number of mutilations are permitted because current farm practices mean that to ban mutilation would be likely to result in more extensive pain and suffering. That does not mean that the veterinary profession condones painful mutilations, but that we must accept the least-worst option at this point and strive to find a solution that will remove the need for mutilation.

We welcome the inclusion of powers to cover the licensing and registration of activities involving animals. We would like to see pet shops added to that list and consideration of a ban on the use of wild animals in travelling circuses, and we would welcome further consultation. In relation to greyhounds, it is important to ensure that there is one body responsible for enforcing licences across all greyhound tracks.

We welcome the proposal for recommended codes of practice for non-farmed animals, and wish to see a code on breeding to be included in the list. Some welfare codes have been introduced in England, Scotland and Wales, with varying degrees of success. The codes will form an important part of increasing the education of the public on animal welfare issues, and the Department must therefore make sure that the codes are clear and accessible to ordinary pet owners. One code that is missing from the English and Welsh legislation is one on the welfare issues surrounding breeding of companion animals.

In English legislation, there is precedent for breeding issues to be considered in secondary legislation. Paragraph 28 of schedule 1 to the Welfare of Farmed Animals (England) Regulations 2007 states that:

“Natural or artificial breeding or breeding procedures which cause, or are likely to cause, suffering or injury to any of the animals concerned, must not be practised.”

Consideration should be given to the recommendations of the Bateson report and the Associate Parliamentary Group for Animal Welfare (APGAW) report on dog breeding. The veterinary profession is fully in support of measures to control and significantly reduce hereditary defects that are a threat to dog welfare, as recently highlighted in those reports and elsewhere. The Bateson report states that:

“No one should breed companion animals without careful regard to characteristics (anatomical, physiological and behavioural) that may put at risk the health and welfare of the offspring or the female parent.”

I will now present our evidence on tail docking. Previously, Brian McAuley and I presented detailed evidence on the subject to the Committee on behalf of the British Veterinary Association. I remind you that, today, we present the views of the veterinary profession in the North of Ireland, alongside our colleague Ian Stewart from the Association of Veterinary Surgeons Practising in Northern Ireland. We agree with the views that were expressed by the British Veterinary Association, and the BVA is fully supportive of our submission. The BVA submission, which has already been presented to the Committee, is more detailed. For your convenience, I will highlight only some of the points and refer to other matters that have come to light since our presentation on 9 March.

There is no doubt that tail docking of dogs, which is normally carried out without anaesthetic, is a painful procedure. The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) defines docking as a mutilation. Although it accepts that the term “mutilation” is emotive, it can find no satisfactory alternative. Legally, docking can be carried out only by veterinary surgeons. It is normally done, without anaesthetic, when the dog is between three and five days old. I can clarify that, under the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966, it is illegal for anyone in the UK, other than veterinary surgeons, to dock dogs’ tails.

Four reasons to oppose docking are: pain; the removal of an appendage that is used for communication; the potential for long-term side effects; and the lack of long-term benefit to the

animal. It has been accepted that tail docking should be made illegal, and that is already the case in England, Scotland and Wales. The controversy concerns whether an exemption should be made in respect of working dogs. The veterinary profession is opposed to that exemption, and I will present the reasons for that.

It is accepted even by the British Association for Shooting and Conservation that tail docking involves pain. The Committee's query was: it is done in lambs and pigs, so what is different about dogs? As I mentioned, it is about what is best as regards the bigger picture of the animal's welfare. There is a danger that pigs will eat the tails of other pigs, and that encourages cannibalism. Members' packs include three peer-reviewed papers relating to that problem. There are serious problems with fly-strike if a lamb's tail becomes contaminated with faeces.

The veterinary profession is constantly researching ways in which tail docking of farm stock can be avoided without long-term adverse welfare consequences. At the moment, it is not possible to end the practice of docking in pigs or lambs completely. However, it is now less common because of improved husbandry and management. That is highlighted by work that was carried out by Dr Niamh O'Connell at the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) farm in Hillsborough. Communication among dogs and between dogs and humans are complicated processes. That is an important issue, particularly in relation to cosmetic docking. Behavioural problems can be related to an inability to communicate adequately when the tail is removed.

The tail is also useful for balance and movement; for example, a tailless greyhound will have difficulty running around a track. There is some evidence that docking may lead to long-term physical effects. A peer-reviewed publication showed that there is an association between incontinence, neutering of bitches and docking. Studies that were carried out in the veterinary schools of Bristol and Edinburgh showed that association in 295 spayed bitches in Bristol and 63 in Edinburgh. It was not possible to state, from the data acquired, that the docking was a causal factor, but the breeds that had been docked showed a higher incidence of incontinence.

Neuromas occasionally occur at the site of docking, and those are painful. Poor technique can lead to chronic inflammation, which, in turn, will lead to infection and occasionally exposure of the bone of the tail. In extreme cases, haemorrhage at the time of procedure can cause death. A photo in the packs that we provided shows a litter of 11 puppies, all of whom died as a result of haemorrhage following docking. Interestingly, 47% of respondents to a 2010 survey that was

carried out by the profession in the Province indicated that they had treated puppies for the effects of docking.

It has been argued that docking tails will prevent damage to the tails of working dogs. A study by the Edinburgh Veterinary School between January 1977 and October 1984 on tail injuries on over 12,000 dogs showed no significant differences in injuries between docked and undocked animals.

There are three other recent surveys that refer to tail injuries, of which two are peer-reviewed and without bias on breed or background. A peer-reviewed paper, entitled 'Risk factors for tail injuries in dogs in Great Britain' — written by Diesel et al, published in the 'Veterinary Record' and funded by the National Assembly for Wales, the Scottish Government and DEFRA — includes a survey of over 138,000 dogs presented to 32 veterinary practices in England, Scotland and Wales. In those animals, 97 cases of tail injury were analysed. Some 227 owners of controlled animals were also involved in the survey. There were 29 working dogs, of which 24 were game shooting dogs. Although a weakness in the survey is that the number of working dogs is rather small, this remains the most comprehensive survey of tail injury in GB, carried out without bias and including representative samples of both urban and rural dogs. The survey concluded that 0.29% of dogs suffered from tail injuries, meaning that 500 puppies needed to be docked to prevent an injury to one tail. It is acknowledged that the number of working dogs included in the survey is small.

A further peer reviewed paper, by Houlton, deals with injuries to shooting dogs over a three-year period. Some 1,912 dogs were included. Tail injuries formed a small proportion of the injuries. The dogs included 409 spaniels, and 3.7% of them suffered tail injuries.

None of those surveys supports the proposal to introduce an exemption to the ban on docking puppies.

A third survey of tail docking was carried out by working-dog owners in Scotland. That survey is unpublished; it is not peer-reviewed; and it is flawed in that it sought information purely from owners of working dogs with injuries to their tails in Scotland. It did not seek information on working dogs that had no tail injuries. That is doubtless the reason why it reports a significantly larger proportion of tail injuries than the peer-reviewed papers. Strangely, even that

presentation acknowledges that the custom of shooting-dog dock, namely removing one third of the tail, does not prevent tail injuries. That seems strange in a survey that aims to justify docking as a means of preventing injuries to working dogs. No one claims that injuries to tails do not occur in working dogs. Injuries to tails occur in all breeds of dogs, whether working or not. Equally, in all the surveys on tail injuries, there appears to be a propensity for tail injuries in spaniels, and in particular, in springer spaniels.

We are debating not whether injuries occur in working dogs. Experience in veterinary practice shows that any working animal will, from time to time, sustain injuries to various parts: the tail, the ears, the legs, the feet and any part of the body. There is no extensive published work that attempts to list the sites of those injuries, their prevalence, or their frequency in various breeds. The Houlton survey on shooting dogs, to which I referred, does that only to a relatively minor extent. The only thing we can be sure of is that injuries occur.

The question is how best to protect the welfare of dogs overall. It is an established fact that docking puppies causes pain and distress, and can kill pups. It is also an established fact that there can be long-term welfare problems relating to docked tails. It has now been accepted in England, Wales and Scotland that cosmetic docking is unacceptable and it has been made illegal. That is not yet the case in the Republic of Ireland, but it will be discussed in due course. The veterinary profession in the Republic, as represented by Veterinary Ireland, supports a total ban on docking puppies.

We must consider whether the welfare of working dogs will be improved or compromised by a total ban on docking. The question is whether to grant an exemption for the docking of working dogs, by allowing all spaniels and hunt point retrievers to be docked, knowing full well that only a small proportion of them will ever work. Is that beneficial to the welfare of those breeds?

Tail docking has been banned completely in Australia, Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Israel, the Netherlands, Scandinavia, Switzerland and South Africa for several years. Personal communication with veterinary surgeons in many of these countries has shown that there has been no increase in tail injuries in working dogs since the ban was introduced. It may well be argued that such injuries may not require veterinary attention, but it is difficult to accept that the welfare of the animal will be adequately catered for if veterinary assistance is not sought in the case of injury. It is also interesting that none of those countries has moved to amend the

legislation. Members' packs contain communications from the Swedish and Norwegian veterinary associations confirming that.

There is no doubt that working dogs are at a significantly greater risk of injury than the average companion animal, but experience and practice shows us that heads, noses, ears, limbs and, for that matter, the body, are just as likely to be injured as the tail. No one suggests prophylactic amputation of any other part of the body to prevent injury.

It has been submitted that the systems in England and Wales work well, so that is what should happen in Northern Ireland. However, the law is not working in England as it cannot be enforced correctly. A vet can report illegal docking to the local authority, but no action has been taken because clients are refusing to tell who docked their dog's tail.

The other major problem is with identification. As it is not sensible or practical to microchip puppies at three days old when their tails are docked, it is not possible to definitely identify that puppy at eight to twelve weeks old when it is presented for microchipping. The bottom line is that the veterinary profession, taking all the evidence available to us, cannot support the concept of introducing an exemption for working dogs that would allow them to be docked.

In summary, we would like to give the support of the veterinary profession in Northern Ireland to the Welfare of Animals Bill, and draw attention to the following matters as they may relate to it: equine welfare and its responsibility; mutilations of animals; licensing and registration of activities involving animals; and welfare codes, including the hope that the breeding of companion animals should also be considered for inclusion. In particular, we fully support the Minister's proposal for an absolute ban on the docking of dogs' tails. Thank you.

The Chairperson:

Thank you for that presentation. At the outset, I will ask a question or two. We have been told in the past that docked animals are physically or psychologically disadvantaged; however, papers that you presented on 9 March state that:

“Evidence that docked dogs find it more difficult to communicate with other dogs is anecdotal.”

The Veterinary Association stated that there is no evidence of any disadvantage. Do you accept that there is conflicting evidence on tail docking?

Mr Thompson:

There is always conflicting evidence on tail docking. There is no way around that; there will always be conflicting evidence between those who say it is a useful thing and those who say it is not acceptable and not useful.

The Chairperson:

Does that include within your own profession?

Mr Thompson:

Of course. Any profession that has unanimity on any subject is unique, just as it is with the Committee.

The Chairperson:

You stated in an earlier evidence session to this Committee that the docking of dogs' tails causes pain at the time of the procedure and for a period afterwards. You also likened the initial response to the procedure to a human touching a hot object and uttering a word such as "ouch". Is that sufficient evidence to bring about a complete ban on docking?

Mr Thompson:

That in itself is not sufficient evidence, but there is sufficient, peer-reviewed evidence that there is pain associated with tail docking — very definitely.

Mr T Clarke:

Following on from your suggestion that there is further evidence of pain, is that evidence suggesting it is worse? You initially said on 9 March that it was just a case of "ouch".

Mr Thompson:

There is peer-reviewed evidence in scientific papers to indicate that there is pain. How do you assess the severity of pain?

Mr T Clarke:

What I am asking is, when you were here previously in March, you likened that pain to "ouch". You are now saying that there is peer-reviewed evidence to say that there is pain. What is it like, and how has it been measured?

Mr Thompson:

I can only refer you to the papers that we have on that subject, which we have listed in our submission. I do not have the expertise to give you that answer, but there are papers here that refer to the pain. If you wish, I will take a moment to tell you what those papers are.

The Chairperson:

On the back of Trevor Clarke's question, may I ask another one? In a written submission to the Scottish Parliament's Rural Affairs and the Environment Committee, a Mr John Bower stated:

“Pain is present, however minor and fleeting, and it can be measured. Pain is possibly the least powerful argument as it is so slight.”

Those are the words of a vet in Scotland who is in favour of the ban.

Mr Thompson:

I would not say that pain is the most powerful argument against the ban. The most powerful argument, as far as we are concerned, is the lack of long-term benefit to animals.

Mr T Clarke:

May I follow up on that, Chairperson? If it is painful, why do you suggest in your paper that, when vets carry out the procedure, they do not give the dog an anaesthetic?

Mr Thompson:

The simple answer is that administering an anaesthetic is, in itself, a major problem for neonatal animals of two or three days of age.

Mr T Clarke:

Which is worse — giving the dog the anaesthetic or the pain that it goes through while its tail is being removed?

Mr Thompson:

I would say that they are probably equal, if, in fact, it was more sensible and safer to give an anaesthetic to prevent the pain that is associated with tail docking. Giving a local anaesthetic, which is the only effective way of doing it, inflicts an element of discomfort. There is some discomfort in putting the needle in and injecting it. Giving an anaesthetic will not necessarily

cause less pain in that particular case.

Mr T Clarke:

What you are saying is that you are likening the pain to that of receiving an injection. You actually said that the pain caused to the dog by injecting the anaesthetic is similar to the pain experienced by the dog when its tail is removed. That makes me think that removing the tail is not very painful. Many of us, if we were going for a procedure, might choose the pain of that rather than experience the pain of an injection of anaesthetic.

Mr Thompson:

I have already stated that pain is one of the factors, but it is not a major factor as far as we are concerned.

Mr T Clarke:

It is the first one. There are four reasons to oppose docking. The first is pain; that is what you referred to in your paper.

Mr Thompson:

Yes, that is absolutely correct. I can put those in any order you wish.

Mr T Clarke:

But you have not quantified the pain. You are now saying that it is similar to the pain of having an anaesthetic injection.

Mr Thompson:

I was attempting to refer you to the papers in which the pain aspect is properly assessed. I am sorry; I have not had the chance to do that yet. There are papers that classify the pain, indicate why there is pain and describe its severity.

Mr W Clarke:

Thank you for your presentation. I came to this inquiry with the opinion that there should be a total ban on docking dog's tails. However, during earlier submissions and oral evidence, a case was made for docking working dogs' tails. You mentioned that cocker and springer spaniels and other flushing breeds suffer a great deal of damage to their tails. As a result, I wanted to look at

those issues in more detail and determine whether more pain would be caused to dogs following accidents. There is a lot more evidence still to come, and although we were hearing only one side of the story, we are hearing your views now. What is your professional view? Do dogs experience more pain from tail injuries than they do when their tails are docked? I am talking about flushing breeds in particular.

Mr Thompson:

I have been doing all the talking; perhaps my colleagues would like to talk about that.

Mr Brian McAuley (Veterinary Northern Ireland):

There would be some pain associated with an injury. The tail contains sensitive tissue and nerve supply, and whether it is cut or otherwise damaged it will be painful. In all cases where tail injuries are dealt with in a veterinary practice, the animal would get a full anaesthetic, and the repair would be quite painless. However, some pain is associated with tail injuries. They could be injured by doors or people trampling on them. Those are the majority of tail injuries that I see. I have not seen a hunting dog with a tail injury in years, but I have seen loads of domestic animals, including greyhounds and Labradors, with tail injuries. Pain is associated with those injuries because tails are sensitive tissue. They have a nerve supply.

The Chairperson:

Which is likely to be more painful: docking a tail or amputating the tail of an older dog?

Mr McAuley:

The older dog would be in more pain, but I qualify that. You are comparing one against one and whether it is less painful to take the tail off a small pup than to have an adult dog undergo an amputation. That is not really what happens. A person would have to remove the tails of perhaps 200 pups to save one working dog.

The Chairperson:

What about from a welfare perspective?

Mr McAuley:

The welfare perspective, as it stands, would lead to a lot of spaniels and so on ending up as companion animals with their tails cut off. I take into account the full therapeutic value. In that

case, cutting off tails is a bigger welfare issue than repairing the small percentage of hunting dog tail injuries. Injuries affect a small percentage of all the spaniels that are bred in this country.

Mr W Clarke:

The Committee took a decision to ask for the removal of clause 6. I voted against that. What would be the consequences of removing clause 6? Who would carry out tail docking if it were removed? Who would police the docking of the tails? I want to get a flavour of that scenario.

Mr Thompson:

Policing is a difficult issue, because who polices anything in this country? Hopefully, we have a society that abides by the law, but that is questionable at times. At the beginning, I heard you ask whether, if the clause were removed, it would still be legal for anyone to dock dogs' tails. It is not. It is illegal in the whole of the UK for anyone other than a veterinary surgeon to dock a dog's tail. If the clause were removed, it would open the door for cosmetic docking. I will not say that everyone agrees, because unanimity is not present in anything in this world, but the vast majority of sensible people accept that cosmetic docking is of no benefit to any animal. If the clause were removed, it would mean that cosmetic docking could occur in the North of Ireland and not in any other part of the UK. That would be derogatory. Even if we accept that there should be an exemption for working dogs, there should never be an exemption for docking the tail of any puppy for cosmetic purposes.

Mr Molloy:

Thank you very much for the presentation. The issue is just as confusing as ever. I was wondering about sensible people and how vets assess themselves.

Mr Thompson:

It is questionable.

Mr Molloy:

Mr McAuley said that he did not see any working dogs with damage to their tails. Is that not because, to date, most working dogs already have their tails docked?

Mr McAuley:

That argument has been put forward before. That is true.

Mr Molloy:

So you do not see them, then?

Mr McAuley:

No.

Mr Molloy:

You presented evidence along the lines that it was a myth that working dogs' tails were damaged.

Mr McAuley:

We have always accepted that working dogs can injure their tails.

Mr Molloy:

I refer again to the letter from the BVA. It has listened to this Committee, but it does not always get its facts right. I will repeat this again so that the BVA can send me another letter: vets have a vested interest in the process. What does it cost to dock a puppy's tail, and what does it cost for you to treat a working dog whose tail has been damaged or injured?

Mr Thompson:

I can answer that clearly without giving black and white figures. If the veterinary profession were to dock dogs willy-nilly, it would make a damn sight more money — probably 10 times more — than if it were to dock the injured ones only, because of the number of dogs.

Mr Molloy:

I asked how much it costs for you to dock a puppy's tail.

Mr Thompson:

I have not docked a puppy's tail for the past 30 years. I am probably prejudiced and cannot answer.

Mr Stewart:

I have not docked one for 20 years.

Mr Molloy:

Is there no fee involved?

Mr Thompson:

There is no fixed —

Mr Molloy:

If a tail is damaged by a door or something else, what would that operation cost?

Mr McAuley:

Including anaesthetic, it would probably cost at least £100.

Mr Molloy:

We are in the wrong profession. The issue is about how you look at that. They talk here about small amounts of money. However, the issue was raised that you have a vested interest in trying to maintain the proposals on the current lines because working dogs' tails could be damaged. That was my original point.

You talk about the oath that you have taken. That oath is important and is about the welfare of animals. How do you assess the fact that, if you do not dock working dogs' tails, they will have welfare problems later?

Mr Thompson:

We have to take into account the overall dog population and decide whether it is reasonable to remove tails from 100% of working dogs when a conservative estimate suggests that 2% to 5% may work in due course. We do not have a vested interest in doing that in any shape or form. As I said, I am quite certain that if we were to dock tails right, left and centre, we would make an awful lot more money than we would from dealing with injured dogs' tails.

Mr Molloy:

You refer to another survey that says that you would have to dock 500 puppies' tails to deal with 0.29% of tails. What is the total number of surgeries that were surveyed across the UK? What are the injuries to working dogs in that situation?

Mr Thompson:

I would have to look at the paper again —

Mr Stewart:

A total of 52 veterinary practices took part.

Mr Thompson:

I cannot give a figure, but there are probably at least 1000 veterinary practices.

The Chairperson:

I have the paper in front of me. From a total of 4,853 registered practices in England, Wales and Scotland, 52 took part.

Mr Molloy:

If you multiply the number of injured tails from those 52 surgeries by the 4,000 surgeries, an awful lot of working dogs' tails would have been injured.

Mr Thompson:

I have no reason to suspect that it would be any higher than the 0.25% that is mentioned in the survey. I have no reason to suspect that that percentage would be any different across another 52 or 100 practices. Why should it be any different if we expand that?

Mr Molloy:

It adds up if you take it across 4,000 practices rather than 52. We can assume that an awful lot more dogs' tails will be injured. Is your profession not about looking after the welfare of dogs?

Mr Thompson:

Absolutely. However, we are talking about percentages. If it amounts to one in 500, it does not matter whether the total is 25,000 or 150,000.

The Chairperson:

It does. If the figure is prorated out, as Mr Molloy has said, it equates to 26,500 injuries and 8,500 amputations.

Mr McAuley:

How many tails would we amputate to prevent that?

Mr Molloy:

The same question applies to lambs and pigs. How many of their tails do you amputate to prevent one or two injuries?

Mr McAuley:

The difference is that the incidence of injuries is so high in pigs.

Mr Molloy:

How many pigs' or lambs' tails do you amputate to prevent a small number of injuries?

Mr McAuley:

In a recent paper, the percentage of tail biting in some units can be as high as 40% or 50%. There is a big therapeutic benefit of docking the tail to prevent injury, and a lot of work is ongoing to try to reduce that to the point where we can maybe stop docking pigs' tails altogether.

Mr Molloy:

What does it cost to amputate a pig's tail?

Mr McAuley:

Farmers do it themselves.

Mr Molloy:

So, vets are not involved in that? Surely a pig has the exact same feeling and pain as a puppy?

Mr McAuley:

They are trained to do it and —

Mr Molloy:

So, farmers are trained to do that?

Mr McAuley:

Yes.

Mr Molloy:

And you are saying that only vets can dock pups' tails?

Mr McAuley:

That is the law.

Mr Molloy:

I am not asking you about the law. I am talking about you in a welfare context, and your only interest, as this letter says, is welfare. So, if you are interested in welfare, surely you must be concerned. I have not seen any communication that refers to that, except, as Mr Thompson did, to dismiss the question that I raised about lambs' and pigs' tails. So, where is the welfare issue with pigs' and lambs' tails that you are concerned about?

Mr Thompson:

You have three papers showing the welfare issues and how we, as a veterinary profession, are doing our damndest to try to prevent —

Mr Molloy:

But you are saying that you accept completely that a farmer can do that in a farmyard on his own, with no anaesthetic or professional advice. They have just got into a way of doing it. Yet for dogs, you want a different standard. Why?

Mr Stewart:

Normal pig farms have a veterinary visit every quarter, and the vet assesses the welfare of the pigs and the incidence of tail biting. He can then authorise and train the stockman to try to reduce the incidence of biting.

Mr Molloy:

That is one thing, but if the pig has caught an infection, that will be picked up in a least one quarter of the year. So, if a whole herd of pigs has already been infected by what was done, it will be picked up some time later. Is that OK?

Mr McAuley:

Not really. That would not be in the farmer's interests —

Mr Molloy:

I know that. It is probably not in the interests of a dog breeder or owner to do it either.

Mr McAuley:

Yes, but it does happen, and the repair of them is certainly —

Mr Molloy:

The bit that concerns me is why your only concern is for pups and dogs. The number of pigs, lambs and sheep would be a lot greater than the total number of dogs.

Mr McAuley:

We are concerned about the pigs as well. A lot of research is going on to try to reduce the level of tail biting in pigs. If that is improved, we would be in favour of them not being docked.

Mr Molloy:

You are talking here to the Agriculture Department about concern about welfare of animals. However, you are only responding to an issue in a paper that the Department put forward, but you have not said that there should be a ban on other methods, too.

Mr Thompson:

We said that we are doing our best as a profession to cater for the welfare of all species — pigs and lambs exactly the same. The circumstances of husbandry make it an impractical proposition for us to do it at this stage, but we are doing everything in our power. A lot of work on the welfare of pigs and tail docking is going on at Hillsborough. As I said, there are three papers, one from America and two from this part of the world, all of which relate to the tail docking of pigs.

Mr Molloy:

It seems to me that the vets, like the Department, pick and accept the surveys that they like but dismiss all other surveys because they have not been peer referenced. So, the ones that you do not like, you throw out. There are a number of references in one paper of personal experience

and information from across the world in relation to this. That is not peer referenced, yet you present it today as evidence.

Like the Department, this Bill on the welfare of animals could be very good. Like your presentation today, however, tail docking has taken up the entire session, and the Department is in danger of the Bill being thrown out because of tail docking, and the otherwise good aspects are being skived over because tail docking has now become the issue.

Mr Thompson:

You talk about information from other parts of the world. That does not need to be peer reviewed. In absolutely legal black and white it has been banned in all those countries and remains banned.

Mr Molloy:

So, is the peer review of what happened in Scotland and the number of working dogs that were injured irrelevant? Are the other peer reviewed papers also irrelevant?

Mr Thompson:

No, I already said to you that that is a true survey by people whose primary purpose was to maintain the docking of dogs' tails. They did not do anything to enquire about the working dogs that were not docked.

Mr Molloy:

We have shown that the main source quoted by you and the Department, which states that 500 puppies would have to be docked to prevent one tail injury, is not correct. When we multiply that across the number of surgeries in England, Scotland and Wales it is found that the total number of dogs' tails injured would be a major welfare issue about which the veterinary profession should be concerned.

Mr Thompson:

We are extremely concerned about welfare. That is why we have taken our figures from across the world and recognise that there has been no movement to alter that situation in countries where tail docking has been totally banned for a number of years.

Mr Molloy:

It is a wee bit like doctors differ, patients die. We have here one association saying that the docking of dogs' tails should be banned and another, the Veterinary Association for Wildlife Management, has an entirely different view, so vets are the same as doctors.

The Chairperson:

On that note, we will move on, Mr Molloy. Mr Thompson, are you aware of a report by Robert Wansbrough in Australia?

Mr Thompson:

The name is familiar. Remind me of the report that we are talking about.

The Chairperson:

It is a report on the tail docking of dogs in Australia for cosmetic purposes in which he says:

“There have been no scientific studies or double blind trials conducted to compare the effects of tail docking in one sample of dogs with a similar sample of undocked dogs. Similarly there have been no studies that measure the initial pain and the ongoing pathological pain inflicted on docked dogs.”

There you have it in a nutshell.

Mr Thompson:

That is one person's view.

The Chairperson:

It is an interesting and accepted view.

Mr Thompson:

Is that view coming from Australia?

The Chairperson:

Yes.

Mr Thompson:

In Australia, tail docking has been banned for the past five years, and there has been no move whatsoever to alter that situation.

The Chairperson:

That person favours the ban on tail docking but still makes that statement.

Mr Thompson:

He is perfectly entitled to his view.

Mr Beggs:

It has been mentioned that there are two differing views in the veterinary profession. How many vets does your organisation represent? Have you any idea how many there are in the other group? I want to gauge the weight of opinion.

Mr Thompson:

To my best knowledge, we represent the veterinary profession in Northern Ireland. The other veterinary surgeons, although perfectly entitled to their views, do not represent the veterinary profession. They represented the organisations for which they presented evidence, which is their prerogative.

Mr McAuley:

In a straw poll on the ban of tail docking, some time ago, about 80% of vets who responded were in favour of a total ban.

Mr Thompson:

Our membership in this country numbers roughly 300.

Mr Beggs:

Is it fair to say that the ban on cosmetic tail docking in GB has led to fewer visual images on TV, from Crufts, of docked dogs? In other words, will the fashion accessory of having a docked dog disappear, leading to it becoming a lesser problem in breeds other than those docked for valid health reasons?

Mr Thompson:

In due course.

Mr Beggs:

OK. The first of the two surveys involved 52 practices. Is there an indication of how representative they are of the profession as whole? Are they largely urban practices? Are they rural? I am trying to get a sense of whether this is a general straw poll or one of practices that do not contain many working dogs.

Mr Thompson:

No. They did their best. It specifically states that the poll fairly reflects practices in rural and urban communities. That factor was taken into account.

Mr Beggs:

OK. Again, that survey stated that 0.29% of dogs suffered tail injuries. The other survey, of purely working dogs, arrived at a figure of 3.7%. What percentage of working dogs that were injured had their tails shortened or docked?

Mr Thompson:

You are referring to the Houlton survey of shooting dogs. Again, from memory, the initial year of that was before the ban in Scotland, and the second year was after the ban.

Mr Beggs:

How many shooting dogs were working dogs, as opposed to being dogs of a working breed?

Mr Thompson:

They were all working dogs. I know the guy who produced the paper, and I have talked to him about it. He is very keen on the shooting industry and is very much a shooting man.

Mr Beggs:

Some 3.7% of the dogs had tail injuries, what percentage of them actually had tails?

Mr Thompson:

I am sorry, I cannot answer that question.

Mr Beggs:

It is a difficult percentage to work with, but there would be a low number of injuries if the dogs

had no tails.

Mr Thompson:

I assume from the timing of the situation that, in the second year, animals with undocked tails were included in that percentage. The survey covered the whole country.

Mr Beggs:

I would have thought that a valid peer review would have asked that question. It is a critical point if you are trying to use that in an argument. It is a very important question to have answered so that we know the significance of whether there should be a ban among working dogs.

Mr Thompson:

I have not talked about the issue to the guy who wrote the paper, but, in fairness to him, the purpose of his paper was not to look at tail injuries, but to look at all injuries of shooting dogs. Tail injuries just came in as a side issue.

Mr Beggs:

OK.

Mr Thompson:

He was not surveying dogs to look at tail injuries. He was surveying to look at all injuries.

Mr Beggs:

It appears to me that further surveys need to be done.

Mr Irwin:

I do not want to see widespread docking of dogs' and puppies' tails, but that is not the issue. The issue is about working dogs. You said that the survey showed injuries to a small proportion of working dogs, but other surveys have been presented to the Committee that showed that up to 50% of working dogs had injuries to their tails. Therefore, the evidence is not totally conclusive. However, you said that it is not possible to end the practice of docking in pigs or lambs but that it is now less common. Where do you get that evidence from, because I am a farmer, and it is certainly not less common? Why is that used in your evidence?

Mr Thompson:

I will refer that question to my colleagues, because they are in farm practice, and I am not.

Mr Stewart:

The pig industry now uses environmental stimulae and toys. Pigs are kept closely confined in concrete pens, but they are sociable animals. They forage, and their natural instinct is to search for food. However, they lack that stimulae when they are in pens with food provided for them all the time. Therefore, that leads to boredom and the temptation for tail biting.

Mr Irwin:

Are you saying that it is less common than it was?

Mr Stewart:

There are a lot more rules to do with stocking density. There are more appropriate numbers for pigs in a pen, and farmers are introducing toys to distract them. Niamh O'Connell is doing some work on feed delivery systems and the way in which pigs are fed to give them more time feeding, as opposed to feed simply being provided ad hoc. Therefore, work is being done, and efforts are being made to reduce the practice of docking. The problem is a lot better than it used to be. Pigs are monitored when they go to the slaughterhouse, so the farmer gets feedback on the amount of docking taking place.

Mr Irwin:

In your evidence, you said that docking was less common in piglets and lambs, but I do not think that that is the case. That is my argument. I think the vast majority of animals' tails are docked. I am not sure of the figure, but it is very high.

Mr Savage:

A lot of things that I was going to mention have been talked about already. Is the docking of tails not down to timing? We are talking about pigs and lambs.

I have been a farmer all my life. My vet, who used to hold one of your positions, showed me how to do dock tails when I was a young fella. There is no way that pain was caused to any of the animals, whether they were pigs, dogs or pups. The timing is very important.

As far as I am aware, there was always a part of a pig's tail at the end that was numb, which is why pigs tails were docked. Once that bit of the tail was eaten by the rest of the pigs when they started to fight and the pigs got the taste of blood, there was no stopping them. That is why docking that part of the tail came into play. Is there no way that a compromise can be found? We have talked here all day. We need a wee bit of common sense. There is a problem, but unless we bring in a bit of common sense, it will not be resolved.

Mr Gibson:

I want to ask about communication, which was given as one of the reasons for your opposition to tail docking. To what extent is communication impaired? From my experience, a dog will communicate more through attitude. If you approach a dog, it can communicate to you very quickly whether it likes you or not. Smell is perhaps the greatest sense used in communication.

I want you to expand a little further on that issue and outline the extent to which you regard communication as being impaired through the docking of the tail. Dogs that still have a third of their tails can still use them to communicate, express friendliness or whatever.

Mr Thompson:

Those are very accurate observations. The tail is only one method that a dog uses for communication with other dogs and humans. The likes of Rottweilers and Dobermanns have the whole of their tails removed, which causes great difficulty in assessing anything from that end of the dog, such as attitude. Half-docking a tail will not affect a dog's communication levels significantly. The effect on communication applies to dogs with tiny tails or that are totally removed. That is cosmetic docking and is a major factor for the dog. For other dogs, tail docking is a smaller factor.

Mr P J Bradley:

Thank you very much for the presentation. When dogs are brought to you with injuries, how does the treatment of tail injuries compare with the treatment of broken toes, legs or shoulders or of damaged ears? Are tail injuries more of a problem, less of a problem, or similar to other injuries?

Mr Thompson:

Tail injuries are relatively rare and are more prevalent in non-working animals than working

ones. Your colleagues quite rightly said that if a tail has not been docked, it is more likely that it will be injured. That is a fact of life.

Mr T Clarke:

I want to go back to the four reasons in the presentation for opposing docking. One was pain to the animal, but I have not heard a reason to oppose docking due to pain; it was likened to an injection. Another reason for opposing docking was that it removed an appendage used for communication. We have just heard that it does not really affect communication. So that is two out of four reasons ruled out. Will you explain what the potential long-term effects to animals and the lack of long-term benefits to animals are? You have ruled out the first two today.

Mr Thompson:

That may be your view, and you are perfectly entitled to it.

Mr T Clarke:

It is my view, and I am entitled to it.

Mr Thompson:

That is fine; I am not disputing that you should have that view. The fact that I do not agree with it is totally irrelevant.

Mr T Clarke:

You have not made a good enough argument to convince anyone otherwise. You suggested —

Mr Thompson:

You have not made an argument for your point of view either.

Mr T Clarke:

You have suggested that the pain is likened to an injection. That would not suggest to anyone that the pain is so acute that they should not remove a dog's tail. Is that not fair?

Mr Thompson:

No. I would not accept that at all, but still.

Mr T Clarke:

Will you perhaps convince me on points three and four?

Mr Thompson:

I will do my best. The third point relates to the long-term side-effects of docking. We see long-term side effects in animals that have injured the tips of their tails, and those side-effects continue for quite some time. The question of incontinence is not a black and white issue. It is there, but we would not say that it is a cause. All that we would say is that there is an association.

Mr T Clarke:

What do you mean about the tip of a tail? Are you talking about tails that have been docked? What are the long-terms side effects of a tail that has been docked?

Mr Thompson:

A tumour or neuroma can develop on the end of tails.

Mr T Clarke:

Is that as a result of the tail being docked?

Mr Thompson:

Yes.

Mr T Clarke:

Is docking the only cause of that?

Mr Thompson:

Yes. As far as the long-term benefit to the animal of not being docked is concerned, we have been talking about that all along. The people who back the docking of working dogs' tails will say that there is a long-term benefit to them by docking their tails. We would contend that there is no long-term benefit to the dog community by docking one tail when there is a problem with a lot of tails that are not docked. I am sorry if I am not making myself very clear.

Mr T Clarke:

That is OK. I understand what you are saying. How many tumours have you seen on dogs that

have had their tails docked? What percentage do they account for?

Mr Thompson:

There is no question that it is a small percentage. I could not argue that it is a major factor.

Mr Molloy:

How many dogs have urinary problems after being neutered?

Mr Thompson:

Bitches that have been spayed can develop urinary incontinence.

Mr Molloy:

Would that be fairly regular?

Mr Thompson:

It is more common than we would like.

Mr T Clarke:

As Francie Molloy said, if your organisation is interested in the welfare of all animals, why has it not called for neutering to be banned?

Mr McAuley:

It provides therapeutic value. If you did not neuter, you would have an awful pile of dogs.

Mr T Clarke:

Is that a reason to put a dog through unnecessary pain?

Mr McAuley:

It would lead to a welfare issue with there being too many dogs.

Mr Molloy:

Would that not be more to the benefit of the public than the dogs?

The Chairperson:

We have been more than generous with the time allocated to this evidence session, and I am going to wind it up. Before I do, I want to pose one final question, which the witnesses will be relieved to know does not relate to tail docking. The Department would state that the Bill allows for subordinate legislation to be brought forward for issues such as equine welfare in circuses. Do you think that that is sufficient?

Mr Thompson:

It would be very useful to have that secondary legislation. The main problem with equine welfare is having the resources to police it.

The Chairperson:

That is fine. I thank the witnesses for their attendance.