

## **The bioethical problem of dangerous dogs (analysis of human and animal interests)**

### **Preface**

How is it that people use dogs but the relationship between dogs and people involves some risk to humans? It is obvious to most people that dogs can pose some risk but what is the relationship, what are the factors that may lead to a risk and how great is the risk? These are central issues that are considered in this book.

The species that we use as our closest companion is a carnivore that preys on both small and large animals. It is becoming clearer as DNA analysis progresses that *Canis familiaris*, the domestic dog, is the same species as *Canis lupus*, the wolf. It seems quite possible that, thousands of years ago some clever wolves associated with humans because the humans could kill large animals that the wolves could chase and corner but that were risky to kill. The humans benefited from the chasing ability of the wolves so the association persisted. Hence dogs domesticated humans. This suggestion (Broom 2003, *The Evolution of Morality and Religion*) is only slightly different from the more conventional view that people domesticated dogs. Whatever the evolutionary origin, however, the hunting ability of dogs was an important component of their early relationship with people and remains important to those who use dogs for chasing, flushing or retrieving wild animals or for defending themselves or their property. Indeed, many people rear their dogs and train them in such a way that the predatory or aggressive qualities of the animals are promoted. Some of these animals are particularly dangerous to humans, especially if encouraged to attack by their owners or if they perceive that the humans are a threat to themselves, their owners, or their territory.

As Simone Pollo explains in Chapter I of this book, “Dogs are apart of our life”. Why is this? The particular qualities of dogs that have allowed them to coexist with humans for at least 12,000 years include especially the fact that they are “The social carnivores” as Eugenia Natoli points out in her chapter on Ethologic (Chapter 2). Dogs work together with other dogs and can also work together with humans. Only a sophisticated social species could do this.

Dogs have great value to people as companions and for various kinds of work, some of which depend upon their remarkable olfactory ability. Odour discrimination by dogs is good enough to allow us to use them to find individual criminals or to detect explosives or drugs. Dogs can also guide the blind or deaf or weak if properly trained. These wide-ranging uses(Chapter IV) and the great affection that many people feel for individual dogs, are reasons why occasional aggressive behaviour towards humans is tolerated.

If dogs are aggressive to humans, as explained in this book this may be because they are behaving in a defensive, territorial way, or because they are behaving as a dominant individual punishing a subordinate, or because they attack in the course of predatory behaviour. The first two motivations may result in injury to a person but this is seldom life-threatening. However, predatory aggression can sometimes lead to serious injury or death. The very small number of cases when people are killed by dogs usually involve young children or elderly people. Most of these cases also

involve more than one dog. Packs of dogs are more dangerous to humans than individual dogs. It is important to assess the risks of dog attacks (Chapter III) in an objective way

It is difficult to find out what events led up to some dog attacks and this may be because the humans were not blameless in the interaction. Some children and adults deliberately provoke dogs in order to amuse themselves and are then sometimes surprised when the dog responds by biting them or by a more prolonged attack. The attacked person will seldom report that their own actions resulted in the attack but will put the blame on the dog.

Legislation about dogs and their actions is considered in Chapter VI of this book. It is my view that the most important component of legislation that could reduce the likelihood of dog attacks on humans is to have large fines on those who are responsible for the dogs. A dog-owner may be less likely to train their dog to be aggressive, so that the dog attacks someone, if they risk a heavy fine by doing so.

Dogs vary, according to their breed, in their anatomical characteristics including jaw strength. A Rottweiler or Staffordshire Bull Terrier can inflict greater injuries upon a person than smaller-jawed breeds. However, this does not mean that dogs of these breeds are more likely to attack a person. Training, rather than breed, has the greatest effect on potential for a dog to be dangerous. This issue is also explored in this book (Chapter V). The solution to questions about legislation on dangerous dogs is to focus on the owners rather than on the breed of dog.

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