A Survey on Perceptions of Responsible Dog Ownership in Ireland.

Compiled by: Catherine Devitt, Locksley Messam, Andrew Kelly & Alison Hanlon - May 2016.
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction and Study Aims:

Understanding societal perceptions towards responsible pet ownership allows for a more targeted approach to implementing education-based campaigns. Recognised as Ireland's leading animal welfare charity, the Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ISPCA) uses education to prevent animal cruelty and promote animal welfare. In 2015, the ISPCA alongside the School of Veterinary Medicine, University College Dublin was awarded funding under the Irish Research Council 'New Foundations Scheme' to undertake an exploratory study on perceptions of responsible dog ownership in Ireland.

The study employed a two-step approach involving i) a review of the scientific literature on responsible pet ownership and ii) a cross-sectional study that aimed to build a profile of dog ownership, and also capture perceptions of both dog owners and non-dog owners with regards to responsible dog ownership. The ISPCA will use key findings from this research to inform future educational initiatives on promoting dog welfare.

Review of the Literature:

The Animal Health and Welfare Act 2013 (Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, 2013) places a legal responsibility on pet-owners in Ireland to provide for the needs of their pet. However, there is very little scientific research on responsible pet ownership in Ireland (Downes et al., 2009, 2011).

Having a dog as a companion animal should not compromise the welfare of the animal, or pose a risk to the community or environment (Schuppli and Fraser, 2000). When conducted responsibly, companion animal ownership can enhance both animal and owner well-being (Rollin and Rollin, 2001). Not all dog-owners however are aware of their legal responsibilities, or understand what is required to support the health and well-being of their dog.

The following section presents a summary of some aspects of responsible dog ownership.

Dog Identification and Dog Neutering:

Although there has been a reduction in the number of dogs entering Irish pounds over the past ten years, over 14,000 dogs were either seized, surrendered or collected by pounds in 2014 (Dog Control Statistics, 2014). The recovery of lost dogs by owners can be aided by identification tags, licensing, and/or microchipping. However, not all dogs wear identification tags, are licensed or are microchipped (Lord et al., 2007; Slater et al., 2012). Failure to microchip has been associated with perceptions that microchipping is unnatural and expensive (Rohlf et al., 2012). From 31st March 2016, legislation enacted under the Animal Health and Welfare Act will require that all dogs be microchipped and registered with approved dog identification databases [Microchipping of Dogs Regulations 2015]. These databases must be members of EUROPETNET to allow for maximum traceability.

Many welfare organisations actively encourage dog owners to ensure their dogs are neutered (e.g., Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, “Neutering your Pet”). Failing to neuter a dog is often associated with owner concerns over cost, intent to use the dog for breeding purposes, and a belief that neutering is not required as the dog is always supervised (Favier, 2009; PDSA, 2014; Downes et al., 2015). The likelihood of neutering increases when owners believe that neutering improves dog behaviour, is a legal requirement, and a practice that friends and family would agree with (Rohlf et al., 2010).

General Dog Health Care:

The main drivers to help the provision of proper health care for dogs include social pressure, a positive relationship between the dog and its owner, and positive beliefs regarding health care provision (Rohlf et al., 2012). A positive relationship and good communication between the dog-owner and veterinarian is crucial for compliance with veterinary recommendations. Misunderstandings, owner confusion, and uncertainty can all increase non-compliance among dog-owners (Lue et al., 2008). Cost is also a concern among some dog owners. For example, research has shown that in addition to lacking an awareness about vaccination and/or believing that it is unnecessary, finding it too expensive is one of the main reasons for non-vaccination of dogs (PDSA, 2014).

Dog Exercise and Obesity:

Exercise is important for the physical and mental health of dogs. When it comes to exercising their dogs, owners are influenced by their assessment of the dog’s ability, whether or not they have access to off-leash or exercise friendly areas, and whether or not they enjoy exercising their dog (Cutt et al., 2008; McCormack et al., 2011; Degeling and Rock, 2013). Proper education on dog exercising is also important. The barriers to providing appropriate dog exercise can be overcome by finding a physical activity that is enjoyable for the owner and which satisfies the exercise needs of the dog (Cutt et al., 2007; Hoerster et al., 2011; Lai et al., 2011).

Shared lifestyles illustrate the relationship between obesity, dietary intake and physical activity in both dogs and their owners. Obesity can reduce the dog’s quality of life, and increase the risk of disease (Hinkenberg et al., 2006; German et al., 2012). Factors influencing dog obesity include genetic predisposition, neuter status, and dietary/exercise management (i.e. owner knowledge, attitude and behaviour towards feeding and exercise) (Bland et al., 2009). Creating awareness in the entire household is required to prevent and reduce obesity in dogs.

Dog Fouling:

Dog fouling is a societal issue, with implications for public health. The specific location of dog fouling (e.g., in a sports field vs. scrubland) can influence whether or not dog owners clean up after their dog (Lowe et al., 2014). The threat of enforcement (i.e., the risk of being fined for failing to clean up after their dog), the risk of being confronted by others and dog waste campaigns do not necessarily have a positive influence on dog owner behaviour. Lack of dog-waste bins has been one explanation and may explain why owners fail to discard their dog-waste properly (Lowe et al., 2014). Demographic factors provide further understanding. For example, male owners, owners from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and owners who let their dog off-leash were least compliant with the dog fouling regulations (Lowe et al., 2014). 

Dog-owner typologies have been categorised by attitudes towards dog fouling: “proud to pick up”, “it is the right thing to do”, “I have done my job”, “only if I have to”, and “disengaged” (Lowe et al., 2014). Making dog-owners aware of the health risks associated with dog fouling may help promote responsible owner behaviour (Webley and Switer, 2000).

Study Methodology:

The research team used a convenience sampling approach for participant recruitment. An on-line survey, invitation poster and information letter were sent to all N = 3,170 staff members employed in UCD via a university list-serve. Responsible dog ownership affects wider society - both owners and non-owners of dogs - thus, the survey invited responses from both communities.

The survey asked questions on dog ownership, attitudes to dog fouling, dog neutering and micro-chipping, veterinary care for dogs, attitudes to dog exercise and nutrition, respondents’ knowledge of dog legislation, and demographic questions.

Six hundred and sixty-nine staff members (21% of total staff population) completed the full survey with 858 staff members (27%) answering at least one question.
KEY RESULTS

The participants comprised 47% dog-owners, and within this cohort, 42% of dog-owners acquired their dog from a breeder (23% from an off-line breeder, and 18% from a breeder on-line). Some 29% acquired their dog from a welfare group/animal shelter. In terms of preparing for getting a dog, 45% relied on experience (i.e., they already or previously had a dog), 29% researched on-line, and 24% obtained advice from family/friends. A total of 85% reported that their dog was microchipped, and 84% indicated that their dog was neutered.

Awareness of Dog Legislation in Ireland:
Over 85% of respondents were aware of laws governing the requirement to have a dog license, fines for dog fouling, and the restrictions on certain breeds namely, those to be kept on a leash and muzzled in any public place. However a substantial proportion of respondents were not aware that dogs must at all times wear an identification collar (42%), that it is unlawful for an owner to abandon their dog (30%), allow their dog to stray (37%) or that it is illegal for any person to dock a puppy’s tail for cosmetic purposes (33%). Results suggest a limited degree of knowledge regarding aspects of the legislation around responsible dog ownership, particularly among non-dog owners. Although non-dog owners may not need to understand the legislation unless they are intending on getting a dog, an absence of understanding may affect their ability to recognise, and thus report to the relevant authorities, possible instances of irresponsible or illegal behaviour among dog owners.

Views on Microchipping and Neutering:
A list of disincentives to microchipping was presented to respondents: concerns over the safety of microchipping, the cost, the necessity, and whether or not it was required by law. The cost of microchipping, when the owner is not on a limited financial budget, was a concern for 9% of respondents, more males (15%) than female owners (6%) agreed with not microchipping for low income households.

Male respondents, in particular, male non-dog owners showed greater levels of agreement with the cited circumstances which might prevent persons from microchipping their dog. Overall, however, agreement with disincentives to microchip was low among the overall respondent cohort.

Respondents were asked to indicate a list of scenarios on the necessity and health impacts of neutering, and the appropriate age. Over 60% agreed with the statement that neutering is necessary even “when the dog is confined to the home/is always supervised.” Non-dog owners expressed uncertainty regarding some aspects of neutering, such as whether or not neutering is appropriate when the dog is younger than six months (males = 52%, females = 56%), whether or not a neutering cost of €100 is expensive (males = 42%, females = 29%), and whether or not neutering is necessary when the dog is confined to the home/is always supervised (males = 52%, females = 56%). Approximately 40% of dog owners felt that neutering puppies (less than six months old) was inappropriate.

Views on Veterinary Care for Dogs:
The majority of respondents believed that it was necessary to take a dog to a veterinarian at least once a year. In contrast, some 15% of respondents believed that there was no requirement to bring a dog to the vet except when sick.

In terms of reasons for not getting their dog vaccinated, most respondents (85%) disagreed with the statement “vaccination is unnecessary” as a disincentive to getting the dog vaccinated. However, there was less agreement regarding the statements “vaccination is too expensive” (40% neither agree nor disagree) and “dog owners do not think about vaccinating their dog” (67% agreed).

Views on Exercise and Feeding for Dogs:
The survey presented to respondents a list of barriers arising for dog owners in terms of exercising their dog. These included not being physically able to exercise the dog, not having the time, lack of access to good exercise space, and not knowing about the dog’s exercise needs. Just over 50% of respondents in both cohorts agreed that some dog owners are not physically able to exercise their dog as often as they should, and some don’t know how much exercise their dog needs. There was less consensus however, on whether or not lack of time to exercise was a justifiable barrier (with over 50% of male and female respondents disagreeing) Over 60% of male and female respondents disagreed that lack of access to a good exercise area was a sufficient reason for not exercising a dog.

Listed statements on dog-feeding included not having enough information, cost; giving treats; feelings about non-commercial foods; worrying that the dog will be hungry; feeding based on perceptions around dog shape or weight; and feeding based on veterinary advice. Over 70% of both male and female respondents agreed that dog owners don’t always have enough information about dietary needs, are influenced by cost when choosing food, and may find it difficult to resist giving their dog a treat. Items of less agreement (between 50%-60% agreed) included feeling that non-commercial foods are healthier, and worrying that the dog will be hungry, perceptions around the dog’s shape/weight. More females (60% as opposed to 48% of males) agreed that dog owners feed their dog based on advice from veterinary professionals.

Views on Dog Fouling:
Over 90% of all respondents regardless of gender agreed that it is necessary to clean up after their dog even if nobody else was around, when the dog has fouled on a street pavement or paved walkway, when the dog has fouled in a public park or playing field, and whether or not there was a bin facility nearby. Not all respondents (37% of male dog owners, 31% of male non-owner respondents, 17% of female dog owners, and 18% of female non-owners) agreed that it was necessary to clean up after the dog has fouled in scrubland, open countryside or farmland. Proportionately more male non-dog owners (18%), than female non-dog owners (11%), did not believe it necessary to clean up after a dog has fouled regardless of the location.
DISCUSSION

This cross-sectional study surveyed staff in University College Dublin to build a profile of dog ownership, examine perceptions of responsible dog ownership in Ireland, and to support the ISPCA’s remit to increase awareness and understanding of duty of care towards companion animals. A review of the scientific literature informed the development of an on-line survey which targeted dog owners and non-dog owners.

In terms of preparation for getting a dog, study results point towards the prevalence of purchasing from a breeder (23% purchased from a breeder offline, 19% from an online breeder) as a source of dog acquisition, and the reliance on experience, advice from family and friends and on-line research as preparation. Lack of, or inappropriate preparation is a contributing factor in dog relinquishment (Diesel et al., 2010b), although dog relinquishment was not considered in the survey. Awareness and education targeting potential owners on the possible animal welfare implications of purchasing from a dog breeder may help bring about appropriate and informed decision making regarding dog acquisition. Despite many reporting that they acquired their dog from a welfare group/animal shelter, obtaining advice from a welfare group/shelter was a less common form of preparation. Seeking advice from a veterinarian also proved less popular among dog owners. Although this study did not seek dog owners’ perceptions of the veterinary-dog owner relationship, a positive relationship between pet owners and their veterinarian is important for pet owner compliance with veterinarian recommendations (Lue et al., 2008). There may be value to developing educational material that aims to communicate to potential dog owners, veterinarian advice on how to prepare for getting a dog.

Despite a general acknowledgement that cleaning up after dog fouling is required in most locations, not all respondents, males in particular, believe this is always required (i.e. regardless of the location), especially if the dog has fouled in scrubland, open countryside, or farmland. This result is consistent with findings from elsewhere. For example, Lowe et al. (2014) reported that although 98% of dog owners in the UK agreed that they should clean up after their dog on street pavements and public parks/playing fields, only 56% agreed that this should be the case in all locations. Wells (2006) found that male dog owners were less compliant with the regulation on dog fouling. Even though members of the public may be aware of fixed-penalty fines for failing to clean up after their dog, this does not necessarily translate into responsible behaviour with regard to dog fouling (Lowe et al., 2014). Making dog owners aware of the potential health risks of dog fouling, and the number of dog owners already cleaning up after their dog may be effective strategies for promoting more responsible owner behaviour (Webley and Siviter, 2000).

Although neutering is seen as necessary even when the dog is always under supervision, there exists a lack of awareness and consensus on the appropriateness of neutering at six months and before the female has had a litter, and regarding the cost of neutering, particularly among non-dog owners. The cost of neutering, and whether or not the dog is used for breeding, has been identified elsewhere as influencing the decision to neuter [see Faver, 2009; Downes et al., 2015], as have positive perception on the health and welfare outcomes of neutering (Downes et al., 2015). Not all respondents in this survey may be aware of the potential health gains, leading to concerns regarding the appropriateness of neutering. Educational information on when neutering is appropriate, and on the positives associated with neutering, may in turn, reduce concerns regarding the financial costs involved. There may also be merit in providing incentives to dog owners, encouraging them to neuter their dog. Owner perceptions that microchipping is unnatural and expensive is associated with a lower likelihood of microchipping (Rohlf et al., 2010). Although, overall, most respondents disagreed with the listed scenarios as barriers to microchipping, there is some evidence to suggest that cost was a concern.

In terms of veterinary care, results suggest an absence of information on the annual health requirements of dogs [e.g., annual vaccination]. In the UK, only 38% of pet owners were familiar with animal welfare legislation (PDSA, 2014). In this study, although the majority of respondents were aware of most laws, areas where greater information provision may be required relate to the illegality of abandoning a dog, allowing a dog to stray, not having an identification collar on a dog, and docking a puppy’s tail or allowing another individual to do so. It is still legal for a veterinary surgeon to dock the tail of certain working breeds, but has been deemed unethical by the Veterinary Council of Ireland for a veterinary surgeon to do so. Fewer male respondents (in particular, non-dog owners) were aware of a number of dog-related laws, suggesting the need for targeted educational interventions in relation to holding a license for a dog, enforcement around dog fouling in a public place, identification requirements, and tail docking. Although non-dog owners may not need to understand the legislation unless they are intending on getting a dog, an absence of understanding may impact their ability to recognise, and thus report to the relevant authorities, possible instances of irresponsible or illegal behaviour among dog owners.
• Not all dog owners may be aware of their legal responsibilities, may not understand the concept of responsible pet ownership, or know what is required in responsibly owning a dog. Dog owners may benefit from information provision on their legal requirements, particularly under the Animal Health and Welfare Act 2013 and the Control of Dogs Act 1986. This could follow the example of the RSPCA's information document ‘Dogs and the law’ (RSPCA, 2015).

• The choices made when sourcing and acquiring a dog are important for responsible dog ownership. It is recommended that potential dog owners be advised to ensure they are obtaining a dog from a reputable dog breeder. Considering the popularity of on-line channels (in preparation for, and when acquiring a dog), use on-line channels for communicating and targeting information on preparation for getting a dog and responsible dog ownership.

• In preparation for getting a dog, dog owners often rely on experience, researching dog care on-line, and obtaining advice from family/friends. Dog owners should be encouraged to engage with more formal aspects of dog ownership (e.g. obtaining advice from a vet, a dog trainer, or from a reputable welfare group/animal shelter). There may also be merit to using i) case studies to inform on what is involved in preparation for keeping a dog, and ii) directing potential dog owners to adequate on-line information.

• Informing dog owners of the health and environmental risks of failure to clean up after dog fouling may be an effective strategy for promoting more responsible owner behaviour. Any such information strategy may benefit from targeted educational interventions particularly aimed at challenging perceptions concerning the need to clean up after dog fouling regardless of the location.

• Ensure that dog owners are aware of the annual health requirements of their dog (e.g. annual vaccination). Recommend veterinary practitioners to put in place a system that reminds their clients of the necessary annual health checks for their dog.

• Uncertainty pertaining to neutering costs, at what age neutering is appropriate, and whether or not neutering is appropriate before the female has had a litter, may influence the decision to neuter. Inform dog owners of the benefits of neutering their dog, while emphasizing that neutering is a practice regarded as socially acceptable among peers (i.e. friends and family would agree)

• Encourage dog owners to develop positive relationship based on good communication with their veterinarian. This will help them comply with veterinary recommendations, and encourage dog owners to seek advice on their dog’s health.

REFERENCES


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