



European Society of Veterinary Clinical Ethology

ESVCE position statement on risk assessment

Background and preamble:

Within the field of veterinary behavioural medicine requests are often made to assess the risk posed by a given dog, as a result of national statutory requirements, e.g. legislation and by-laws or, and more often even, within behavioural anamnesis to decide on prognosis and how a specific dog shall be handled during the course of behavioural medicine.

In accordance with the requirement of the European Society of Veterinary Clinical Ethology to promote best practice within areas of its influence, it is recognised that the ESVCE should offer guidance on this matter. The following represents a position statement from the ESVCE on the matter of risk assessment. These are developed from the principles and application published by national and international governmental bodies and institutions.

Opinions like these frequently address issues of concern to stakeholder, policy makers and the general public but, by their nature, they are often difficult for a non-specialist to understand. It is important that in the communication concerning dangerous dogs, ESVCE considers carefully the effects of its standpoints on the interests of the animals, the society and the veterinary profession. Therefore ESVCE will only give judgment on the general principles and not on their applications in local situations, where different legislations or circumstances can alter the transformation of the principles in specific measures.

It is unreasonable to expect all risk to be eliminated, but measures should be taken to protect people as far as 'reasonably practicable', and this concept is enshrined in the Law of many countries. A risk assessment is a careful examination of the available evidence relating to potential situations that could cause harm to people or other animals, to determine what measures could or should reasonably be taken to reduce harm. It is not an absolute quantification of risk, but a professional judgment, which informs the advice given. Thus the concept of a risk assessment to ensure a situation is without risk or totally safe is unrealistic and unsound.

ESVCE supports the following framework for the assessment of risk of a dog in a well- defined situation as a model of good practice.

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The risk assessment of a dog in a well-defined situation identifies five stages, which are described below and expanded upon in relation to veterinary behavioural medicine:

1. Identify the hazards (risk factors)

It is important to assess the proposed circumstances and identify how individuals may be harmed, i.e. where when and why might harm arise? This should include not only an assessment of the animal's physical and behavioural characteristics but also its physical and social environment. An evaluation of the knowledge, attitudes, beliefs and personality of an owner and/or other people with responsibility in the close environment of the dog should be considered as an important aspect of a risk assessment as they may alter the probability of a significant event, by affecting the level of control they exert on the circumstances.

2. Decide who might be harmed / at risk and how

Different individuals and groups e.g. different age groups, may be at a different level or type of risk, and these need to be identified. It will be necessary to identify the relevant types of individual that the animal will foreseeably encounter and determine the risk for each. For example the risk to an owner may be quite different to the risk of a similar adult unknown to the dog. If not incorporated in the question of the referring body / person, the expert doing the assessment should specifically determine individuals who might be at reasonable risk.

3. Evaluate the risks and decide on precautions.

In the final report, all reasonably practical measures should be prescribed to minimise risk. If a risk cannot be eliminated, it should be controlled as far as is reasonably possible. Risks should be considered in terms of their nature, probability and severity. A subjective binary high–low scale for each of these dimensions may be sufficient, but should be justified in each case. When assessing precautions, consideration must be given to their feasibility and practicality. This will include assessment of the animal's physical and behavioural characteristics, its physical and social environment, with particular attention paid to the availability of necessary resources, ability (physically, psychologically, financially etc) and willingness of the owner/environment to implement these measures. For example prevention measures may be difficult to implement in a particular case and so the risk remain high. In this case, and with respect to the privacy legislation, the outcome needs to be clearly communicated to those responsible for the animal, and other parties directly involved (e.g. referring person/body, owners...), who all should acknowledge recognition of this situation, and the legal implications of their decision.

4. Record your findings and implement them

A written record of any risk assessment is essential and should include the necessary precautions. This should include current and proposed control measures together with the strategy for the implementation of any new measures. Often the consulting professional will not be directly responsible for implementation, but the importance of implementation and the consequences of failure must be clearly communicated to the client and other parties directly involved (i.e. referring person/body, owners...).

5. Review your assessment and update if necessary

The assessment should be reviewed periodically as it will only relate to the circumstances at that time and these may change. It is important to communicate this to the client and other parties directly involved (i.e. referring person/body, owners...).

Conclusion

- Risk assessment requires consideration of all relevant physical and behavioural characteristics of the dog, as well as all relevant environmental triggers that alter either the risk associated with the severity of any injury, or the risk of recurrence.
- Risk assessment is a professional skill, but is often enhanced by engaging as many individuals as is reasonable for the circumstance, who are familiar with the situation. This might include extended family or fellow professionals, from within or without the discipline e.g. for the assessment of specific factors. Individuals should not act outside their expertise nor be concerned about the need to refer to others further professional advice when circumstances indicate.

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