A Response to Dr. Ian Dunbar

Graham Henderson
Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada

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Registration and inspection of zoos should go hand-in-hand with legislation. The latter is of little value, per se, if it only serves to provide a list of zoos with no reference to their facilities and care of animals. A national register of zoos is desirable and only those establishments that are of a high enough standard should be licensed. Subsequent inspections at, say, three year intervals should be carried out to ensure that standards are being maintained or improved; if this is not the case, the license should be withdrawn. In some countries such a registration system already works well. In Britain the only such schemes are voluntary and, inevitably, tend to attract the better zoos rather than those of less high standard. The zoos on the lists of the Federation of Zoological Gardens of Great Britain and Ireland, for example, are generally those that already have good facilities and where animal welfare is an important consideration, rather than the less sophisticated establishments that could benefit greatly from inspections and advice. The composition of the inspection team is a matter of opinion, but in the case of the Federation it includes a zoologist and a veterinary surgeon, both of whom are experienced in work with zoo animals.

The final point, closer liaison between zoos, animal welfare organizations and conservation bodies is not one that can be enforced. Rather it must develop as a result of improved communications. For too long zoos have been on the periphery of the animal world, running their affairs in their own way and having few contacts with those in other related fields. Much of the misunderstanding would be dispelled if zoos were to play a more active part in debate on animal care and conservation and if bodies concerned with the latter were to make a greater effort to involve zoo staff in their deliberations. ISPA's decision to hold a symposium in 1979 on the role and responsibility of zoological establishments was a useful step in this direction and a good example of ISPA's sound and pragmatic approach to animal welfare.

In this paper I have made it clear that I am a supporter of zoos and have no wish to attack or criticize them unnecessarily. However, there is no doubt that zoos can be a source of “suffering,” that is, avoidable pain or discomfort, and as such must attract the attention of all those concerned with animal welfare. However, I feel strongly that our approach should be constructive. We must press for tighter legislation and for higher standards of animal care. We must give our support to research which will aid in our understanding of zoo animal behavior and assist in the recognition of pain or discomfort. Above all, we must help to educate those concerned with zoological establishments so that the welfare of the animals takes its rightful place.

References

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In his article, “A Strategy for Dog Owner Education,” (211):13-35, 1981. Dr. Ian Dunbar reveals his masterplan. Pet owners are not, he claims, irresponsible, they are this we must somehow contrive to have potential pet owners apply for a license before they may obtain their dog. At the same time as this initial application is made, the hopeful candidate would be issued with an information package, the content of which he or she would be tested on at some indeterminate future date. Almost certainly would spark a further onslaught of “information” designed to eradicate the offending areas of ignorance. The opportunity to finance this program pet food industry, and the end result would be a humane society which had happily of licensing.

On the surface these suggestions appear to offer a utopian solution to the nagging problem of what I, for one, still prefer to call irresponsible pet ownership. How practical grounds; I would caution against its implementation.

By way of background, it might be useful to outline the licensing policies of the society in which I am most familiar, The Toronto Humane Society, for I believe that this system has great potential.

The Toronto Humane Society has, in addition to its many other humane responsibilities, for years been the animal control agent for the Corporation of the City of Toronto. Under the terms of the relevant by-laws we do not operate a shelter, but owner education.

Like any humane society which performs the function of licensing agent, we have the perennial problem of being regarded by dog owners as the “law.” Many appear to resent our attempts to exact the license fee and, having paid their fees, are singularly unresponsive to further pleas, however desperate, for donations.

The appalling rate of return from dog owners, whom one might ordinarily expect to be quite sympathetic to a humane society, occurs for a reason. Our dog licensed Society cum licensing agent. They view their license fee as the full extent of their “commitment” to us and are reluctant to support us in any other material way. Most people adopting animals from our shelter are even reluctant to obtain a free membership. Worse yet, there is a standard drama played out each summer by a distressing number of city residents who seem bent upon avoiding our licensing agents to an extent to circumvent the necessity of fulfilling their legal

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obligation to tag their dog.

Given such infertile ground, I shudder to think what the response might be.

The Toronto Humane Society attempt to spawn in it a program which would not only tax these people's wallets, but also their patience, time and intelligence. The experience of our Society in administering an extensive licensing program in a major Canadian city leads me to believe that any attempt to implement a system to tag a dog owner's household to think what the response might be not only will be required to effectively combat this delinquency would be staggering. Furthermore, as gruesome as the task may animal at all, Dunbar strikes close to home. However, as gruesome as the task may be, it would seem more preferable that the humane society retain its role as “euthanist” anywhere possible. I believe that at the humane society the animals may go “euthanist” anywhere possible. I believe that at the humane society the animals may go somewhere.

Instead of looking toward the development of a complex pre-purchase screening program, I think we must look elsewhere, because municipal pounds may not be dedicated to this end, whereas municipal pounds may not be.

In my alternative to Dr. Dunbar's system is certainly much more modest, for it cannot, however, see how the consent to such a system may be secured from what is undoubtedly the weak link in the foregoing chain: the dog owner. I believe we could expect such an individual to fight this over-regulation of his or her private life. Nor do I imagine that one could count on the already overburdened humane societies. As I have previously intimated, the administration of a major dog licensing program is a project from which the rewards are often uninspiring. The Toronto Humane Society, which I believe has an excellent system, licenses dogs in the City of Toronto at a cost of almost 47% of the revenue gained, which leaves a modest return to say the least. This is achieved through the employment of three full-time staff year round, 5 part-time clerical staff in the winter and 6 part-time license inspectors during the summer. The cost of a contingent information and education program would be, in my opinion, insupportable. Similarly, the administration of such a system would be preposterously complex, requiring test centers, computers to tabulate and issue results, massive printing bills, several mailings per applicant and, I would think, gangs of war-hardened veterans to protect the staff from the onslaughts of indignant, blood-thirsty citizens.

Dunbar’s proposition that we offer to the public the option of obtaining a two- or three-year license, happily, sounds promising. Regrettably, the Toronto Pet Survey, 1978 (commissioned and published by The Toronto Humane Society) showed that for the most part inner city residents only maintained their pets for a period of approximately two years. Furthermore, it is generally accepted (by the majority, even suburban) residents move frequently; a biennially licensing program could easily lose track of those owners who, for their own reasons, wish to disappear. Perhaps rural humane societies would have better luck in this department.

Dunbar has, of course, proposed a means by which the humane society can ease the financial burden of developing his strategy for dog-owner education. However, why the pet food industry (monied as it may be) should want to finance an educational program which will almost certainly antagonize the majority of dog owners is beyond me. He is being overly optimistic when he asserts that his strategy would “certainly generate them some good press”—at best his understanding of human nature and the media is radically different from mine.

My alternative to Dr. Dunbar’s system is certainly much more modest, for it really only could affect, at least at the outset, those people who would adopt from a subscribing humane society.

The Toronto Humane Society currently runs an adoption program which does involve a screening component. Those interested in adopting one of our animals must fill out a form (see below) which asks some extremely germane questions. Based on the applicants’ responses to these queries, and based also in part upon additional verbal questioning, the adoption attendant may either accept or reject the candidate. Large dogs, for example, will not be adopted out to apartment dwellers; dogs or cats may not be given to people who have previously lost a pet through a road accident (it would depend on the circumstances); homes where no one is in throughout the day are scrutinized; and the prospective owner must indicate a willingness to spay or neuter a new pet. This system is not perfect, and we would
obligation to tag their dog.

Given such infertile ground, I shudder to think what the response might be should the Toronto Humane Society attempt to spawn in a program which would not only tax these people's wallets, but also their patience, time and intelligence. The experience of our society in administering an extensive licensing program in a major Canadian city leads me to believe that any attempt to implement a system which would require the public pass tests before they could even receive a license is to court disaster. Even with our similar to that envisaged by Dunbar would lead ultimately to chaos. Even with our system as "euthanist" (for as he more delicately puts it, "extrematist") This is a suggestion of an indeterminate merit. Inasmuch as we would like ideally to avoid euthanizing any animal, all animals at the Toronto Humane Society are adoptable as long as they pass health examinations. However, as gruesome as the task may animal at all. Dunbar strikes close to home. However, we lose track of those owners who, for their own reasons, wish to disappear. The Toronto Humane Society, which has an excellent system, licenses dogs in the City of Toronto at a cost of about 20% of the revenue gained, which leaves a modest return to say the least. This is achieved through the employment of three full-time staff year round, 5 part-time clerical staff in the winter and 6 part-time license inspectors during the summer. The cost of a contingent information and education program would be, in my opinion, insupportable. Similarly, the administration of such a system would be preposterously complex, requiring test centers, computers to tabulate and issue results, massive printing bills, several mailings per applicant and, I would think, gangs of war-hardened veterans to protect the staff from the onslaughts of indignant, blood-thirsty citizens.

Dunbar's proposition that we offer to the public the option of obtaining a two- or three-year license, happily, sounds promising. Regrettably, the Toronto Pet Survey, 1978 (commissioned and published by The Toronto Humane Society) showed that for the most part inner city residents only maintained their pets for a period of approximately one year. Furthermore, it is generally accepted (among all residents, even suburban) residents move frequently; a biennially licensing program could easily lose track of those owners who, for their own reasons, wish to disappear. Perhaps rural humane societies would have better luck in this department.

Dunbar has, of course, proposed a means by which the humane society can ease the financial burden of developing his strategy for dog owner education. However, why the pet food industry (monied as it may be) should want to finance an educational program which will almost certainly antagonize the majority of dog owners is beyond me. He is being overly optimistic when he asserts that his strategy would generate them some good—"certainly more than we do when we suggest—and that one of the benefits of such a system would be, in my opinion, insupportable. Similarly, the administration of such a system would be preposterously complex, requiring test centers, computers to tabulate and issue results, massive printing bills, several mailings per applicant and, I would think, gangs of war-hardened veterans to protect the staff from the onslaughts of indignant, blood-thirsty citizens.
welcome comments from those who know better. However, for the most part, it functions and does enable us to screen out those individuals who would make poor owners. Furthermore, it affords our staff the opportunity to inform the adopter of the principles of good pet ownership. I might also add that many of the rejected candidates become violently incensed, and I am basing my critique of Dunbar's test system in part on this knowledge.

Not everyone, of course, obtains their dog from a humane society, and here one encounters a problem. Breeders might, however, be persuaded to hand out the principles of good pet ownership. Furthermore, it affords our staff the opportunity to inform the adopter of proper care of pets. I have no idea how one could prevent private individuals from giving away or selling dogs. Dunbar, if he holds to his proposal, would have to call for a system of retroactive testing, which would create even more inducement for owners who do not have licenses for their dogs to dodge the authorities. This, of course, would be unacceptable.

It might be possible for a central licensing system to be set up. Every agency that sold animals to the public could be required to be a member and would act as a licensing agent. Each time a pet was sold, the buyer would have to fill out a license application form which would then be mailed to a central processing center for handling. The owner would then be assessed a license fee payable through the mail or in person. Failure to remit the fee could then, under suitable by-laws, result in a unworkable system already exists; perhaps it is unacceptable. But it does deserve some consideration.

The foregoing does not, unfortunately, effectively address the issue of dog owner education head-on. It only offers a stop-gap means of preventing certain people from obtaining pets from a humane society and informing marginal cases of the proper care of pets. If we are talking about the real education of dog owners then I believe we must rather look toward our school systems themselves; Dunbar is naive to think that any long-term change in owner-attitudes will be achieved through a system which calls for a one-time test situation. Humane education is rapidly becoming a fact and I think that in the very near future we will see more and more school boards requiring that it be taught in one form or another. One only has to glance at the National Association for the Advancement of Humane Education's excellent prototype, the Curriculum Integration Guide, to realize that the elements of pet care and basic animal rights will be a part of any program of humane education. If the trends continue then I am confident that we would be correct in viewing the schools as the appropriate forum for dog owner education. Humane societies can help out here considerably, even if they only manage to organize an embryonic program of humane education which involves visits by one of their staff to the schools of their area.

I do not pretend, however, that I can offer concrete suggestions about the composition of humane education or adoption programs. I would only hope that humane societies interested in "strategies for dog owner education" seriously investigate a rigorous adoption system which may or may not be modelled upon our own. They could, moreover, develop modest or extravagant programs of humane education which might involve classroom visits and teacher contracts. Ultimately, I think we must view the process as an organic one; the seeds of humaneness which today we sow in the minds of our students will only bear fruit in the future. As humane societies and humane individuals, however, I believe that it is incumbent upon each of us to work to make that future a reality.

G. Henderson

Toronto Humane Society Dog Adoption Questionnaire

1. Are you interested in adopting a dog for yourself, a member of your immediate family, someone else?
2. Are you 18 or over? If yes, do you live with your parents?
3. Where do you live? (House, apartment) Do you rent?
4. If you live in an apartment, on what floor? Do you have the landlord's permission?
5. Please check any of the following reasons for wishing to adopt: hunting dog, breeding, watchdog, companion, playmate for a child, guard dog for business or property, family pet, other (please explain).
6. If you have any children, please list ages.
7. Do you have any other animals at present?
8. If yes, Cat? Dog? Other?
9. If you have another dog, has it received its annual shots?
10. Is there someone at home during the day who will train the dog?
11. Have you ever had experience in housebreaking a dog?
12. Have you ever adopted an animal from us before?
13. Have you ever had a dog before?
14. If yes, what became of it?
15. Do you believe in spaying? Neutering?
16. Will the dog be kept in the home? Yard? Tied up?
17. Do you own a fenced-in yard?
18. What do you intend to do with your dog when you go on vacation?
19. Did the animals you owned in the past see a veterinarian regularly?
20. What is the name of your previous veterinarian, if any?
21. Are you willing to go to the expense and trouble of taking your dog to a veterinarian for full preventative and medical care?
22. Do you agree to have your female spayed at the Toronto Humane Society Spay/Neuter Clinic?
23. Is any member of your family allergic to dogs?
24. Have you ever had a dog that had distemper or died from unknown causes within the last three months?
25. Are you a member of the Toronto Humane Society? If not, would you wish to join?

Dr. Dunbar's rebuttal will be carried in the next issue, Volume 3, Number 1, 1982.
—Editors

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Not everyone, of course, obtains their dog from a humane society, and here one encounters a problem. Breeders might, however, be persuaded to hand out material to prospective owners, but pet stores and private transactions represent a problem. I have no idea how one could prevent private individuals from giving away or selling dogs. Dunbar, if he holds to his proposal, would have to call for a system which might involve classroom visits and teacher contracts. Ultimately, it affords our staff the opportunity to inform the adopter of the principles of good pet ownership. Furthermore, it affords our staff the opportunity to inform the adopter of proper care of pets.

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