

Politically driven legislation targeting dangerous dogs has had little impact

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UK legislation that targets 'dangerous dogs' has not been shown to reduce dog bites and policies should be based on evidence and risk assessment, suggests a personal view published in the *BMJ* today.

Rachel Orritt, a PhD student of psychology at the University of Lincoln says that dog bites present a "[public health risk](#) of unknown magnitude but no scientific evidence upon which to base a reliable UK estimate has been obtained in the past two decades."

She also says that discussion by medical professionals about the impact of dog-human interactions "sometimes ignores the health benefits concomitant with dog ownership" with one writer in The *BMJ* suggesting that "the only way to stop dog bites will be to ban dogs."

Orritt says there are several studies that show owning a dog is associated with increased physical activity, better self esteem and fewer annual visits to the doctor. She adds that "eradicating dogs would have negative consequences for human health."

She argues that the British news media "confound the matter further through inaccurate representation of the risk posed by dogs."

Inaccurate reporting of [dog bites](#), coupled with public pressure "have contributed to the drafting of legislation," she writes. The Dangerous Dog Act 1991 has been amended in an effort to improve this legislation "but has been shown to be ineffective at reducing dog bite incidence."

Orritt says that to reduce dog bite incidence, "academics and medical and veterinary practitioners need to cooperate to develop effective, scientifically sound risk management strategies. These should be evidence based and should not depend on politically driven initiatives such as the current legislation."

Risk assessment for human violence has proved to be accurate and reliable and Orritt says this "might be a practical preventative measure to reduce injury from dog bite" along with medical and veterinary professionals "familiarising themselves with evidence based resources."

She says that attention must also be given to the psychological health of patients after trauma.

Orritt believes that research is needed to improve care and an "estimate of dog bite incidence" but until this is done, "the scale of the problem is entirely unknown."

She concludes that evidence based measures to inform ongoing risk management, such as developing effective risk assessments, "should result in the reduction in dog bite injuries that punitive legislation has not achieved."

More information: *BMJ*, www.bmj.com/cgi/doi/10.1136/bmj.g4081

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