GUEST EDITORIAL

Dog bites

The dog may be man’s best friend but the child often fares less well in this longstanding relationship. A survey of animal bites in a medium-sized accident and emergency department in Bath, England, showed the rate to be 440 per year—400 of canine origin—the other 40 including, cat, mouse, rabbit, hamster, gerbil, horse, parrot, chimpanzee, tiger, snake and, sadly, Homo sapiens.

Contrary to the usual rejoinder about not biting the hand that feeds it, the canine target is just that; 54% of dogbites were found to involve the hand. Of even greater significance was the 22% of bites that involved facial injury, especially when qualified by the facts that 17% were in the age group 0–10 and 55% were female.

Concentrating on facial wounds, the collected results showed 65% of these to involve the under 12s; 30% of the wounds required suturing and, of these, 13% were referred for plastic surgery.

Figures such as these demand further analysis to identify factors that could be used in the prevention of accidents to children.

Relating the facial wound to the size of the dog that caused it showed 62.5% were caused by a big dog, with 25% by the small dog and the remaining 12.5% by medium-sized dogs. Bites caused by big dogs were found to almost always require surgery. To a certain extent this can be explained by the simple height relationship between animal and victim putting jaws and face on a level.

In an attempt to further understand the problem, the breed of the aggressor was recorded. Numerically this put the Alsatian at the top of the list. Views will now polarize rapidly: ‘I never did trust Alsatians’ at one extreme to ‘the usual prejudice—blame the dog—never the human’ at the other.

If one dares stray into areas of controversy, then statistics must be handled carefully. A simple numerical tally must be corrected for bias introduced by disparate breed numbers.

Once this correction was applied then a more reliable picture emerged. Heading the list was the Collie, followed by the Old English Sheepdog and Terrier. The Alsatian was halfway down the list followed by the Labrador. Bottom of the biting league: the Golden Retriever. The ‘ratio’ between top and bottom was 16.6:1.

Perhaps we should be passing this information to our Health Visitor colleagues—choosing a canine companion could be based less on the Cruft Champion Breed currently in vogue and more on the breed temperament best suited to interacting with children. As with our own species, character is really more important than appearance.

One final comment remains to be let off the leash. Talk to a veterinary colleague and you may discover a quietly held belief that there is a relationship between the breed of
dog and the personality of its owner. Without doubt a subject of controversy and complexity, but can we really just say nothing and carry on stitching?

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