TORONTO HUMANE SOCIETY like no other.

Toronto Humane Society Position Statement: Banning Unnecessary Veterinary Procedures

Toronto Humane Society strongly opposes the undertaking of medically unnecessary veterinary procedures on companion animals, such as, but not exclusive to, tail docking, ear cropping, devocalization and feline declawing. These procedures raise ethical considerations and are rooted in concern over the long term physical and behavioral consequences to an animal, as well as loss of natural instincts, all of which can materially impact quality of life. As a leading voice in animal welfare, the Toronto Humane Society is calling on the provincial government to take action in banning these procedures in Ontario.

Why are Medically Unnecessary Procedures Problematic?

Most medically unnecessary procedures can be traced back to historical practices that are outdated or can be substituted by a more humane alternative today. Whatever argument was made in the past in support of these practices can no longer hold up with advances in veterinary medicine and a better understanding of health implications to the animal. The following examples are useful in highlighting this point.

- **Tail docking** is a procedure that removes of a portion of a dog's tail. This practice dates back to the Roman Empire era, where docking was believed to help prevent rabies, as well as improve back strength and enhance speed. In the 19th century it was a common procedure for working, hunting and guarding dogs, eventually making its way into formalized breed standards via introduction by kennel clubs as a requirement for certain breeds. Side effects of tail docking can have significant impact beyond just physical pain, discomfort, nerve damage and risk of infection and complications. A dog's tail is a critical means of communication, and its removal disrupts a dog's ability to express themself and interact with their environment.
- **Ear cropping** is the removal of part or all of the external flaps of an animal's ear, and, similar to tail docking, can also be traced back to ancient practices. For hundreds of years, ear cropping was a considered functionally necessary for working dogs, to prevent floppy ears from being a liability in fights, while hunting or while defending livestock. There was also a misguided belief that ear cropping would decrease risk of health complications such as ear infections or hematomas. The practice of ear cropping has since evolved to a purely aesthetic one, with a number of associated risks to the procedure that include infection, chronic pain, anxiety or aggression from trauma associated with surgery, and notably, potential long-term impact on hearing and communication.
- **Devocalization** is a surgical procedure that involves removing laryngeal tissue from a dog, rendering them unable to produce normal sounds when barking. This procedure is sought by pet owners almost exclusively for convenience reasons, to limit noise by reducing the intensity of a dog's bark. This surgery is invasive and requires general anesthesia, and almost certainly

results in post-operation pain. There is also a substantial risk of the dog developing scar tissue and narrowing of throat and swelling in their airway. A dog barking is an expression of normal behaviour and a means of communication, as well as a way to signal of threat or danger. Removing this outlet poses a high risk of increased stress, anxiety and frustration, all of which may be redirected in the form of destructive behaviours or aggression. There is also an increased risk of threat to a dog's physical safety because of its inability to ward of threats or alert others.

- **Feline Declawing** (also called onychectomy) involves the amputation of the first knuckle of a cat's toe, thereby removing where the claw grows. Similar to devocalization, feline declawing is sought by pet owners almost always for convenience purposes, and as a means of preventing unwanted feline behaviours such as scratching and damaging household items. Consequences of this procedure can be severe on the cat, including chronic pain and sensitivity in paws, as well as potential for back pain due to altered posture and movement. This form of pain may also mean that the act of walking on or digging in a gravel-type substrate results in pain and aversion to use of the litter box, causing soiling in the home environment. More significantly, there are considerations such as stress and anxiety from restriction in being able to exhibit normal feline characteristics, as well as feeling more vulnerable from a reduced ability to defend themselves.

Legislative Framework in Ontario vs other Jurisdictions

The Ontario government has already demonstrated interest to legislate in support of the welfare of animals, most recently in 2024 through the introduction of the Preventing Unethical Puppy Sales Act (PUPS Act) which seeks to ban the operation of puppy mills. The Toronto Humane Society urges the government to continue prioritizing the subject of animal welfare, and to urgently begin consultations on the important issue of banning unnecessary veterinary procedures.

To date, Ontario is the only province in Canada without any legislation or restriction around performing unnecessary medical procedures on animals. This is despite longstanding advocacy for change by the Ontario SPCA and other local humane societies, including Toronto Humane Society.

Opposition to medically unnecessary procedures is also supported by The College of Veterinarians of Ontario (CVO), the regulatory body responsible for overseeing the practice of veterinary medicine in Ontario. Although most veterinarians no longer offer these procedures, the CVO lacks the legal authority to implement a ban without provincial legislation. This is in contrast to other provincial veterinary associations who have the authority to prohibit such procedures, including British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, New Brunswick, PEI, and Newfoundland. The Canadian Veterinary Medical Association also actively opposes medically unnecessary procedures for cosmetic, behavioural or competitive purposes, on grounds of being ethically unacceptable.

In 2018, Nova Scotia became the first Canadian province to pass a legal ban on cat declawing. Following suit, and after immense public pressure to act, in February 2024 Quebec successfully banned not only the declawing of cats but other elective animal surgeries, on the grounds of it being inhumane to endanger animals for reasons of convenience. And while progress on this front should be commended, Canadian provinces are still behind in comparison to dozens of other countries who have implemented strict regulations on these medically unnecessary procedures, including:

- United Kingdom: ear cropping & declawing are fully banned, and tail docking is illegal except for certified working dogs.
- Europe: Germany, Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Switzerland, Austria, and Denmark all have strict restrictions or outright bans on unnecessary medical procedures.
- Australia / New Zealand: all cosmetic surgeries are illegal without medical justification.

The Changing Tide of Public Opinion

Several advances in scientific research surrounding animal sentience and intelligence have influenced public opinion on their welfare and our overall relationship to animals. Whereas there is still a small minority of the public supporting these procedures, societal sentiment has now reached a point where most people believe animals should be afforded basic freedoms and a right to not suffer unnecessarily. The Toronto Humane Society advocates the well-established and internationally recognized Five Domains Model of Animal Welfare. The Five Domains Model defines categories of welfare-significant factors including Physical and Functional domains of nutrition, environment, health and behaviour and Affective Experience Domain, focused on the mental state of the animal. Adhering to the Five Domains Model inevitably conflicts with conducting medically unnecessary procedures on animals due to the potential for inflicting harm and suffering, and for reasons that are not in an animal's best interests. And whereas certain veterinary procedures on animals may have served a specific function or purpose in the past, we now understand the impact these procedures have over an animal's quality of life. Where procedures are undertaken for cosmetic, convenience or competitive reasons, they can no longer be justified.

Public opinion plays a crucial role in shaping legislation. Given the majority of the public and in the veterinary profession no longer support medically unnecessary procedures, the Toronto Humane Society strongly encourages the government to take action and ensure animals are protected against these procedures under law.

Supporting Resources

- Preventing Unethical Puppy Sales Act, 2024, S.O. 2024, c. 14 - Bill 159 | ontario.ca
- College of Veterinarians of Ontario - College of Veterinarians of Ontario
- Partial Digital Amputation (Onychectomy, Declawing) of Non-Domestic Felids and Other Carnivores Kept in Human Care | Canadian Veterinary Medical Association
- Ban on several cosmetic surgeries for pets now in effect in Quebec | CBC News
- Nova Scotia bans unnecessary cosmetic surgery on animals
- Is tail docking, debarking or ear cropping of dogs legal in B.C.? - BC SPCA
- Tail Docking, Ear Cropping, and Other Medically Unnecessary Procedures: a Brief History and Evidence Against the Practice
- Detailed Discussion of Non-Therapeutic Procedures for Companion Animals | Animal Legal & Historical Center
- https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1098612X17705044
- What are the Five Freedoms of Animal Welfare? - Ontario SPCA and Humane Society
- Five Domains Model vs the Five Freedoms of animal welfare