New approach improves dog health in Indigenous communities

There are many unique issues that arise in Indigenous communities that require different and culturally appropriate responses. The place of dogs in Indigenous lives, communities and homes is one example.

Benefits of delivering culturally appropriate programs to indigenous communities

- Reduces dog bite incidences in communities
- Reduces zoonotic diseases (diseases spread from animals to humans, such as scabies, ringworm, intestinal parasitism)
- Successfully controls community dog population and reduces stray and unwanted animals in the area

Pilot programs delivering dog health in Indigenous communities demonstrate that all members of the community benefit when dog health is improved.

Dogs in rural and remote Indigenous communities around Australia often suffer from poor health. Many are in poor body condition, infested with scabies, mites and other parasites[59]. But it isn't just animal welfare that suffers in these situations – many diseases can be transmitted to humans. And un-desexed dogs may be more likely to attack, leading to dog bites which may require stitches and antibiotic treatment.

Until recently dog programs were ad-hoc, expensive and unsustainable.

In the past, quick-fix culling programs, often driven by well-meaning non-Indigenous people, generated hurt and mistrust. For example, not only was euthanasia of community dogs often inhumane, it was also ineffective, with dog numbers bouncing back in a year.

"This approach encouraged a feeling of detachment towards animals. If people knew there was a chance that someone might come into the community and kill their dog, they would distance themselves from the animal to avoid being hurt. Because those things are now a thing of the past people are much more secure in treating dogs as pets and can love them."

Dr. Stephen Cutter, AMRRIC

AMRRIC is an independent organisation consisting of veterinarians, doctors, Indigenous environmental health workers and academics. It facilitates sustainable dog health programs, with the aim of building the capacity of Indigenous communities to sustainably manage animal health and welfare issues.

Dog health programs are delivered only after extensive consultation with stakeholders, which may include community councils, traditional owners, health workers, women's groups, art groups, schools and other community groups.

"It is essential to have the community on board. Otherwise you are just another one in a very long line of white people coming in and doing things to Aboriginal people that they don't want." Dr. Stephen Cutter

Dr Cutter said that consultation is absolutely essential. "In our programs pet owners are able to decide whether to have their dog treated and how." The effects are tangible. Following a pilot program in the Northern Territory's Kintore in June 2008, dogs were observed to have increased body condition, with many owners proud to have a healthy dog. In addition, there was a reduction in faecal and urine contamination of households from dogs.

Prior to the pilot program, there were 17 dog bites reported to the Kintore police and health clinic. Between the first and third visit there were no reported dog bites.

The organisation partners with Governments, Non-Government Organisations and communities to develop and implement effective animal management policies at national, state and local government level.

Tips

- Where available, partner with AMRRIC to assist in coordinating dog programs in rural and remote Indigenous communities.

Web Links

AMRRIC organisation - www.amrric.org