

Dog Identification for Urban Animal Management: Microchip or Tag?

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ABSTRACT

There is no doubt that microchip implants are a sophisticated method of animal identification. There is also no doubt that universal annual dog registration offers the greatest advantages to urban animal management. This paper presented by an animal control officer of some 20 years experience suggests that microchips and universal annual registration may not be compatible. Councils are advised to think carefully before abandoning the traditional collar tagging method of dog and dog owner identification.

INTRODUCTION

Before embarking on a detailed comparison of the two systems of dog identification (tags and chips), it is necessary to fully understand what animal control requires of its identification system. In other words, it is important to understand the management framework in which the preferred identification method is to be used.

Some 10 to 15 years ago, spay clinics and subsidised neuter schemes were the flavour of the month in animal control. If your council didn't have free or subsidised spaying, you weren't up to date. These schemes were popular and attractive. They were promoted enthusiastically by well-meaning people.

The concept of spay clinics was accepted by all sorts of eminent authorities. In retrospect it is now easy to see that these desexing schemes were a complete waste of a great deal of money wherever they were used. They didn't fix anything. It is hard to see how anybody who really knew about animal control could have seriously expected that they would.

They were an ad hoc measure that didn't logically fit into a systematic approach to effective animal control. They were sold to councils by people with the best of intentions but without much of a clue about animal control.

Microchips are the new idea in animal control for the 1990s. Let's look before we leap!

From an animal control point of view, the first and last requirement of dog identification is to reliably identify not only the dogs but the dog-owners as well. The identification device must effectively link dogs to their owners, to their home base and to their history. The dog identification device best for your council will be the one that does this in the most cost effective, most convenient and most efficient way.

REGISTRATION

Some degree of animal control can be achieved without registering dogs, providing the funds to do the animal control work can be made available from some source other than the dog owners. Apart from funding difficulties, a system without registration would be limited to a very reactionary form of animal control. It would lack even the beginnings of a management foundation.

Dog registration, is the most important tool available to the animal control officer (ACO). Full and effective registration is an essential prerequisite of any management system that seriously expects to control municipal dog problems. Registration provides the mechanism for the following range of essential animal control processes:

- self funding the management system
- facilitating legal processes when enforcement is required
- maintaining a dog and dog-owner management database
- encouraging things like desexing by discounting.

Registration also provides another important, though possibly less obvious, animal control service in testing two types of commitment. It is a two-way test of owner and council commitment.

Registration: a good and simple test of owner commitment

Thorough checking of dog registrations offers this surprisingly useful benefit to councils. It keeps a downward pressure on the overall dog population by restricting casual ownership. If a person is not prepared to register a dog, one can assume that they do not really want it. Neither will they want to take it to the vet if it becomes ill. Nor will they prevent it wandering off down the road to be run over or to breed unwanted litters.

The whole purpose of urban animal management is to promote responsible dog ownership. It is essential, therefore, that the keeping of dogs to which the owner has no genuine commitment must be actively discouraged.

A surprising number of people won't bother to register a dog even though they know that they have to. When confronted by an ACO about non-registration, some of these people will simply surrender the dog rather than pay. Such people are clearly not committed owners. Your community is better off without them as owners.

Registration: a good test of council commitment

It is extremely important that the council should be seen to be actively involved in animal control. You can rely on the public not cooperating if they think the council is not serious about animal control.

Checking dog registrations by an ACO is a process easily understood by dog owners. It gives a good reason for the ACO to approach a dog owner. This process also gives the ACO the opportunity of observing the dog and its behaviour in its own yard and assessing the possibility of future problems being caused by that dog. It also gives an excellent opportunity of answering questions on dog management, or giving help on any matter pertaining to dogs.

Records: the database for management

The method of recording and filing dog registration details may be manual or computerised. Even in our age of computerisation, the system used has to be whichever the operator finds most convenient. Whatever method is used however, the most important thing is that the records should be speedily and efficiently accessible.

ACOs who are doing their job properly will need, on a daily basis, to repeatedly inquire into the record system by using one of the following pieces of information as an access key:

- identification number
- name of the owner
- street address

ACOs interested in proactive management processes will also wish to be able to generate reports from time to time on all kinds of characteristics relevant to the local dog population such as

- Which breeds have been involved in attack incidents?
- How many registrations have been for a discounted amount eg registered by pensioners?
- What proportion of registered dogs are desexed?

Just as it is obvious that dog and dog-owner records need to be speedily and efficiently accessible, it is also obvious that they must be accurate ie. as up to date as possible. Population parameters are easily distorted if part of the dog population is registered incorrectly. It has been estimated that up to 50% of dogs in a community change their status (eg change owner, change address, change owner and address, die and get replaced) in a twelve-month period.

In Mount Isa, after ten years of enforced dog registration by the same two workers, a sample of dog registrations for the years 1990/91 and 1991/92 were compared. Two hundred registrations, chosen using a random numeric process, were examined. Of these, only 121 were unchanged ie. same dog, same owner and same address. Seventy-nine had changed. This exercise was repeated using a random alphabetic process and the trend remained the same.

If changes of this nature can occur over a twelve month period in a fairly stable population, it would seem to me that in other places the dog populations are likely to be even more variable. If changes of this extent occur in one year, how many invalid records would you expect after two or three or five years?

There is, in my opinion, just no way you could rely on a management system that worked on once only life-time registration. Such records would soon become completely unusable for the purpose of urban animal management.

It would also seem to me, that if records are not constantly updated using a vigorous process of supervised annual re-registration, record anomalies would possibly accelerate even more quickly as dog owners became aware that the councils records were unreliable.

Dog registration records have been likened to car registrations. Certainly the easiest way to update the records on a yearly basis is, as with car registrations, to re-register annually. Lifetime registrations would tend to hinder this process.

Why are motor cars always re-registered each year? Maybe it is the best way to ensure that the records are reliable! Why do we get a new phone book each year? Maybe it is because last year's records are changed enough for the overall document to be unreliable. We shouldn't expect dog registrations and tag numbers to be any different to car registrations and telephone numbers. There has to be a system of constant checking.

It is imperative that all dogs be re-registered once a year:

- Keeping records correct and current is so important, that registration becomes a prerequisite for any kind of effective management system, BUT ...
- Registration itself is meaningless without an effective methods of identification, AND ...
- The method of dog identification, must be made as simple as possible both for the dog owners and for the ACOs who operate the management system, IE ...
- The best method of identification is the one that is most compatible with a universal annual re-registration system.

IDENTIFICATION

There are a number of ways to identify animals for the purposes of population or herd management. Brands, earmarks, tattoos, microchips and ear tags all serve to tell you which individual in the population you are dealing with. It is the same with dogs ... Almost there with people and tax file numbers, except we don't quite get branded ... yet!

With dogs, the tags or the chips identify the dog by some type of code. When the dog is registered, that code (probably a number) is the key for retrieval of whatever data you have collected about the dog and may need.

Experience has shown that tags with clearly legible figures, are a practical and cost effective form of dog identification. Failure of a dog registration system is more likely to be a fault of the registration method than of some characteristic of the identification device used.

Tag advantages

- The colour of the plastic tag, which can be changed with each twelve month registration period, makes it obvious at a glance that the registration is current. The colour of the tag also reminds dog owners of their responsibilities.

- The readability of good quality plastic tags is also a big advantage. They can be read by any literate person at a moderate distance. This is an advantage with aggressive and nuisance dogs you might prefer not to have to touch.

It is also useful for members of the public who find a lost dog and want to send it directly home rather than to the pound. If the dog is wearing a tag, the council can be contacted and the name and address of the owner can be given. This reflects well on the council and makes for good public and neighbourhood relations. Injured animals need urgent veterinary treatment can be easily identified in the same way.

- The cost of the tag is also an advantage. Tags cost from 20 to 50 cents. This means that virtually all the money raised in registration goes to the management system as distinct from the tagging system. This advantage is such that authorities can afford to give registration incentives.

Examples of some incentives are 50% discount for early registration and minimal fees for desexed dogs. These incentives are a very important part of urban animal management. It is also true that tags do not represent a financial loss if the dog dies or turns out to be unsuitable.

- Any person can attach the tag to the dog's collar. You don't have to be trained or skilled. You don't have to have an attachment gadget of any type. It may even be sent through the mail if required.
- Another important advantage of tags is that unregistered dogs claimed at the pound may be registered and issued with a tag at that time they are collected with a minimum of fuss and bother.

When you think about it, car registration stickers are coloured, numbered, visible from a distance, able to be put in the post and easy for anybody to apply. Just like dog tags! It is not a fluke.

Possible tag disadvantages

- Tags may become lost or unreadable and may require replacement.
- The owner has to be relied on to put the tag on the dog.
- Tags may be removed by unauthorised persons. This happens much more rarely than one might expect. With yearly updating this is not a major problem.

Promoted microchip advantages

When the microchip is in place it identifies the dog in an invisible tamper-proof way for life with records being kept in a central registry.

Perceived microchip disadvantages

- The chip on its own identifies only the dog. Unless the dog with the chip in it is correctly re-registered each year, the chip doesn't help much. Lifetime registration is a real drawback.

If dogs that were registered stayed with the same owner at the same address for the whole of their lives, lifetime registration would be useful; however Figure 1 shows the reality is that dogs change hands and are disposed of with monotonous regularity and for the most casual of reasons. Lifetime registration would be more helpful if the owners could be relied upon to advise council of any changes. But, as we all know full well, advising council of changes does not have a high priority in the average dog owner's mind.

- Keeping records in a central registry would simply not be practical for any local authority which really required its officers to keep track of the animals in its area. The system has to operate in-house. It is unlikely that councils will want their records to be held by or be accessible to anybody other than their own officers. It is also unlikely that councils or dog owners will be keen to pay for the privilege. The cost of constantly accessing and changing centrally held records might be prohibitive in the long run.
- Microchips cannot be read at a distance. Worse still, they are invisible. You can't even tell from a distance if the dog is currently registered.
- Microchips cannot be read by the general public. They require a special interrogation device.
- Both the chips and the interrogation device may malfunction. Chips can apparently migrate from their place of insertion.

- Chips are possibly a very inflexible identification option.

There are at present two or possibly three different types of implants available. It may be very hard for a council to change types once locked in at the start with a given implant type or make.

It may be hard for the council to retrieve data records should they decide to opt out of the central registry.

It might be hard to retrieve data should they decide to change implant types.

It may be hard to retrieve data if they opt out of implants and go back to tags.

- It is unlikely that councils can have a dual ID system eg tags and chips without complication, cost and confusion.
- Owners of aggressive dogs are often uncooperative. Having to handle an aggressive dog belonging to an uncooperative owner; in order to scan for the number could be dangerous and time-consuming for the ACO.
- Laws and by-laws may have to be changed to protect local authorities, humane societies and veterinary surgeons, in order to cover any action they may take in connection with an animal which has permanent identification.
- The cost of the chips and the cost of the additional work associated with them would have to be a factor when determining registration fees. Registration fees would have to be considerably higher than they are with tags.
- However implantation is to be done, it would involve the dog's owner presenting the dog to a vet for the purpose of having the chip implanted. For many owners, those who go to vets regularly, or who take their dogs out in the care from time to time, this would not be a major problem. For many others who either do not have a car or have limited time or limited patience or have an intractable dog, this would be an exercise they just would not embark upon. The assumption that most dog owners would happily take their pet to a vet for implantation for a fee is naive to say the least. Most would probably in fact object. Some very vigorously indeed!

DEBATE ON THE MERITS OR OTHERWISE OF BOTH SYSTEMS

Does the lifetime fee cover all registration fees? It has been suggested that \$6.50 is the cost of the chip. It has also been suggested that the veterinary surgeon charge \$20.00 to implant each dog. What fee could be realistically charged by council for registering a dog for life with this system?

The fees associated with microchips do not provide any income to the council for animal control purposes. At this stage, it should be reiterated that one of the main purposes of registration is to raise revenue to fund the animal control program. The animal control system still has to be funded regardless of how the dogs are identified. The increased costs associated with providing a less visible and more cumbersome identification system will surely do little to enhance the already difficult task of urban animal management.

The tag system is by no means perfect. However, it's only major draw back is that the owner may not use it correctly. It is a simple, efficient method that has proved itself in time.

LEGAL ASPECTS OF THE MICROCHIP

There are a number of problems that I can see may arise with the use of implants. WHAT IF:

- The chip malfunctions, the owner claims the dog is registered, the dog has changed hands and the original ownership details are unavailable?
 - How do you confirm registration?
 - Should the chipped dogs be visibly branded/tagged as well?
- The dog has lifelong registration with one council and then the owner moves to another municipality?
 - Will the registration money be transferred from one council to the other?
 - Should the owner get a refund and then re register the dog?
 - Are people really likely to reliably transfer details?
 - How many cases will there be like this? Hundreds? Thousands?

- The dog dies soon after registration and implantation for life and a new pup is acquired?
 - Can the microchip be recycled?
 - How many people will feel cheated and simply refuse to register the next dog because they feel they have already paid enough?
- The owner pays for registration and microchip but fails to make the effort to have the chip implanted in the dog?
 - How many cases like this? Hundreds? Thousands?
 - Are these dogs actually registered in a technical and legal sense?
 It is much easier to look at the collar and see if there is a correct tag attached.
- A dog is impounded by the council or presented to a vet for injury treatment and after reading the chip, nothing shows or the registration details prove (when checked with the central registry) to be invalid or the owner is uncontactable?
 - Has the microchip malfunctioned or migrated?
 - Has the dog changed hands?
 - Was the registration correct and valid in the first place?
 - Has the dog been microchipped with a device which is incompatible with your reader?
 - Is there a glitch in the central registry database?
 - Is the registered owner on holidays and the dog in the care of somebody else?
 - Can an SPCA rehome the dog?
 - Can you legally afford to euthanase it?
 - Should the dog be treated by a vet?
 - Should the dog be kept and cared for indefinitely just in case somebody turns up one day and lays claim to ownership?
 - Should you tell the central registry what you have done and risk a backlash and legal repercussions if the real owner is eventually located by them?
 - Is the council or the vet or the SPCA liable if you get it wrong?

Before the microchip, the council or the vet or the SPCA could check for collar and tag. If the collar and tag were missing, they could then proceed quite legally with whatever options seemed most sensible at the time.

CONCLUSION

In Mt Isa, two ACOs manage a community of 25,000 souls which owns 5,500 dogs. Some time ago metal tags were replaced with plastic ones because the numbers of the plastic tags were larger and easier to read at a distance.

As a contractor I have learned that time is money. Efficiency is all important. It seems to me that the use of invisible microchips would add considerably to the difficulty of my work. Routine dog identification would be much more time consuming. Microchips go against the KISS principle that is essential to animal control.

I can see advantages in microchipping dogs for owners who are very concerned to positively and permanently identify a particularly valuable dog with something more sophisticated than a tag or tattoo. This is fine. However, it is not relevant in an overall system of dog population management. Microchips are not a management system.

I would like to make my position clear. Although I am getting old I am not hidebound about change. Mount Isa City Council is now fully computerised and the animal control program is in the process of being integrated. I welcome this along with any innovations which create more efficiency. I welcome anything which makes my job easier and more efficient and which gives me more time on the streets, where it all happens.

In history, technology has made big advances. However this has not always been the case. Retrospective review has sometimes shown what seem to be advances to be more like total disasters at the end of the day. Advances may only be claimed if they really do advance, not just because they use some kind of attractive new technology.

This paper was not intended to be a heavy piece of scientific literature. It is, on the contrary, a review of what dog identification is really all about from the perspective of someone who has worked in animal control in city hall, in court and on the streets for the last 20 odd years.

Councils are being pressured to review their preferred dog ID devices. There are people with vested interests hard at work promoting the new devices. That's OK because review is always a healthy thing. However, it is most important that the review process should be rational and aggressively pragmatic. If it is not, people and pets will pay the price.

My only vested interest is the pursuit of genuinely effective urban animal management. At this stage I think the old dog tags (provided their quality is good) are the best option. They work well for me.

Dog registration systems for some councils may not have been too successful. But, if you ask me, I'd say it was never the fault of the tags!

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Some 25 years ago, I took up the position of Inspector and Kennel Manager at the Toowoomba and District society for the Prevention of Cruelty. It was at this time that my serious interest in animal control started. Seven years later I moved to Mount Isa to manage the council pound. In 1975 I became Dog Warden for Mount Isa City Council, a position I have held ever since. My special area of interest is the behaviour of dog owners. I believe if you can get the people side of the equation sorted out, the dogs aren't a problem.

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