

# Arguments for and against tail docking



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In declaring tail docking in South Africa unethical from 1 June 2008, the SA Veterinary Council followed the growing trend worldwide.

In recent years, most of the European and Scandinavian countries saw the introduction of a total ban on the docking of dog tails for cosmetic purposes. There are no restrictions in Russia, Australia, the United States and Canada, but pressure from animal protection organisations, the veterinary profession and the public is mounting.

Arguments for and against are compelling. An internet search produced horrific pictures of injuries to mature dogs with undocked tails, as well as of complications following neonatal tail dockings.

It appears that the veterinary profession is united in opposing tail docking for reasons, other than therapeutic, but there are individuals who disagree.

## **'Clinical' arguments for tail docking**

In a report to the German Kennel Club, tail docking advocate Prof. Dr. R. Fritsch, Clinic of Veterinary Surgeons, Justus-Liebig University, pointed to a difference in the development of the nervous systems of 'Nestfluchter' (animals leaving the mother soon after birth to find their own food) and 'Nesthockern' (animals staying with, and being fed by the mother for a long time). [Council of Docked Breeds](#):

Excerpts: 'The new born puppy belongs to the 'Nesthockern' in contrast with the horse, cow, sheep, pig and goat which are regarded as 'Nestfluchter'.

The animals in the 'Nesthockern' group are born relatively immature, completely naked, blind, deaf, very immobile and very helpless. Their nervous system at birth is not even fully developed ... and conscious pain is not very likely at that age. There are still cell divisions in the brain, and some of the nervous threads are not fully developed.

It is completely different though, with the 'Nestfluchter'. In these animals, the nervous system is fully developed just after the moment of birth. All senses that serve to get rid of enemies and pain are fully developed. One can neither from physiological knowledge nor from just observation, say that these young animals feel a lot less pain than adults.

From the veterinary point of view, there is absolutely no reason why the banning of the docking of dogs tails should be beneficial to them. In fact, it would be detrimental to their well-being if docking were abolished. Tail docking protects the dog as it is done to avoid problems with tail injuries and subsequent painful treatment that would often occur.'

## **'Clinical' arguments against tail docking**

Although published in 1996, opponents of tail docking invariably refer to the [Wansbrough report](#):

Excerpts: 'Recent advances in knowledge about pain and the changes in approach to pain management refute the premise that 'Puppies do not feel pain therefore tail docking is not inhumane', and the premise that 'the pain and the effects of tail docking are insignificant.'

'Puppies are usually subjected to this pain (direct injury to the nervous system) and trauma at 2 to 5 days of age when the level of pain would be much greater than an adult would experience'...'because inhibitory pain pathways will not be developed.' Wansbrough also points to the fact that animals, including dogs, are used in human medical research because of the physical similarities. He maintains that dogs with docked tails experience other physiological problems, e.g. in respect of balance, defecation (inadequate development of the muscles of the pelvis and rectum), incontinence, as well as communication problems (misunderstandings between man and dog and dogs themselves).

## **To dock or not to dock**

There are many theories on why and when the practice of tail docking started. It is commonly believed to have originated in the Middle Ages in Britain and Western Europe. The reasons included: to prevent rabies, back injury and tail damage in dogfights; to increase speed; and to achieve a uniform appearance in breeds where some are born without tails or with stumps. ([SA Veterinary Council](#)). Tax

avoidance was also a consideration. In Georgian times, people in the UK amputated their dogs' tails to avoid taxes levied on working dogs! (*Wikipedia*)

Today, the main reasons that people give for docking or not docking are basically the same: 'for the health of the dog' and 'that it is how it should look.'

### **The South African situation**

The South African Veterinary Council (SAVC) governs the professional actions of all practitioners registered in terms of the Veterinary and Para-Veterinary Professions Act, 1982. The Council maintains that in declaring routine tail docking unethical, it is in a position to charge veterinarians with unprofessional conduct if they performed the procedure 'for any reason other than purely therapeutic.'

According to the Council, veterinarians who perform tail docking will be liable for prosecution under the Animals Protection Act no 71 of 1962, and if found guilty under this act, they will be investigated by the SAVC in terms of the veterinary act.

SAVC believes that because it did not declare tail docking unethical previously, the SPCA was unable to apply the tenets of the Animals Protection Act and to successfully prosecute anybody who performed the procedure. According to the SAVC, the SPCA will apply the principle of 'maiming' to prosecute people for docking tails.

The Kennel Union of Southern Africa (KUSA) is not at all happy with the ban on tail docking and has sought legal advice. Referring to SAVC, KUSA said 'In their opinion, they are empowered to impose this decision on veterinarians. Thus, SAVC has unilaterally imposed this ban on the dog world, without consultation with stakeholders. The Kennel Union is of the opinion that in accordance with the South African Constitution, freedom of choice should prevail.'

According to media reports, many dog breeders have met the regulations with defiance, and vowed to continue docking their dogs' tails. While some plan to arrange protest marches, others have expressed concern that interest in their breeds and shows will decline rapidly, as had happened in other countries where tail docking was banned.

Helmut Redtenbacher, Chairman of the Dobermann Club of Northern Transvaal, and a member of the Tail docking Sub-committee of KUSA, challenged the legality of the ban when he addressed the SABBA Special General Meeting on 31 May. 'To the best of my knowledge there have been no changes to the law. In presenting the ban on tail docking as a *fait accompli*, the SAVC is using the threat of *possible* prosecution by the SPCA in terms of the Animals Protection Act. The irony is that the SAVC is not empowered to prosecute laypersons, and by their own admission cannot even prosecute veterinarians. They can only take action against a veterinarian, *if* convicted in a court of law. I believe it would be difficult for the prosecution to prove that a dog was treated in a 'cruel and inhumane manner' or 'maimed' because of tail docking. It is also highly unlikely that a court would find anybody guilty of a criminal offence for performing a procedure that has been done for many years,' said Redtenbacher.

It is clear that tail docking is not a conclusive issue, and will not be for a long time. At best, every breeder should consider what is best for the dog, and live by that decision.

As a reminder: the SABBA policy on tail docking (*SABBA Constitution: Appendix A: Breed Standard*)

- THE TAIL IS SET HIGH
- IT IS STRAIGHT AND PREFERABLY SHORT (THREE SEGMENTS).
- LONG TAILS ARE PERMISSIBLE.