

PURE DOG TALK 354 – VETERINARY LEGISLATION IS A SLIPERY SLOPE

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Laura Reeves:

Welcome to Pure Dog Talk. I am your host, Laura Reeves, and we are back with Dr. Marty Greer, and we have a good topic I think for all of us to chew on, if you will, as we start the new decade and the new year and look at some of the legislative issues that are being raised around the country.

Marty's going to put on her hat as a National Animal Interest Alliance board member, and we're going to talk about some of this legislation that is particularly and specifically targeted at veterinary medical decisions for your pet and the government telling you what you can and cannot do which, of course, makes us all crazy and our heads spin off our bodies.

Dr. Marty Greer:

Like I need that, right?

Laura Reeves:

Marty, let's take some of these that we're seeing. For example, New York State has a couple, one on bark softening and one actually on crop and dock. Crop and dock is finally coming to the United States. We've been waiting for it for years. It's been enacted in Canada, obviously, around the world, so it's a bulwark here. What do we do? Why do we not want to encourage this legislation medically?

Dr. Marty Greer:

Right, and medically and logistically, yes. From a logistical perspective, as soon as they start dictating to us what veterinary care we need and need not do, we have a whole nother set of circumstances here that are going to become a slippery slope, and we're going to be very unhappy about it.

Once they start saying to us you cannot do an ear crop, you cannot do a tail dock, you cannot do a bark softening, you cannot do a declaw, you must do a spay, then we get into you must do a dental cleaning. You must provide this level of care for your pet. You must take off this lump, and if that means that you have to give up your child's car seat, your child's medical care because you can't afford both, then you have now had all of your rights taken away as a pet owner, so it's going to start to become an issue that, if those things are mandated, we're going to have clients that stop coming, seeking veterinary care if they are dictated what kind of care they can and cannot have, and that scares me a lot.

Laura Reeves:

Right, and we were talking a little bit off air. We know that, at some levels, some of the veterinary associations are coming out in support of these legislative issues. Can we talk a little bit about why and how we can perhaps have some influence on their opinions?

Dr. Marty Greer:

Yeah, and I think we do need to influence their opinions. They're hearing it from being students from a brainwashing perspective. They're hearing their professors. They're hearing the Humane Society of the US. We're hearing the Humane Society veterinarians all making these kinds of stands, and it becomes problematic, so I think we need to start saying that this is a decision made between a veterinarian and the client, and they have to recognize that, while the veterinarians are involved, we have the ability to provide pre-op blood work, appropriate anesthesia, good post-op pain management. We're really taking good care of these patients, and some of these procedures, ultimately, if they're lost, they're going to start falling into the hands of the laypeople who do these.

I'll tell you, honestly, I have seen your crops done. I have seen a lot of laypeople doing procedures that, really, they're not qualified to do. We don't have appropriate pain management. We don't have appropriate anesthesia. It's a really scary and really slippery slope. They're using anesthetics that they shouldn't be using. Some of them are using them without DEA intervention, so it becomes a big concern to me that, once veterinarians lose this, it's like the equine dentistry. It's like foot trimming in cows. We lost a lot of those things, and, now, it's laypeople doing it and not necessarily doing it with the medical background that they should have to provide medical care.

Laura Reeves:

That piece is terrifying. I mean, we're supposed to be moving forward in society, not backwards. I mean, I'll just use tail docking because it's a procedure with which I'm familiar. Certainly, in the 1800s, when these tails were docked, the guy was taking it out and whacking it off with a hatchet on the stump. I mean, legit, that's how it was done in my knowledge to the last century by some people in this country, and so our goal would be to improve the quality of care, not reduce it. Yes?

Dr. Marty Greer:

Right. Right, and when I see procedures done on kitchen tables with a light overhead and no one running anesthesia, no one checking blood work ahead of time, no one doing EKGs prior to anesthesia, that's a giant step backwards that we've taken in veterinary medicine, because veterinarians have been forced or at least coerced into believing that it's not an ethical thing for them to be doing, so it's still happening. Ear crops are still being done. Debarkings are still being done, and declaws are going to happen, too, so it's a really unfortunate set of circumstances if we do take this giant step backwards.

Laura Reeves:

Right. I think, again, we were talking off air the, if you will, hypocrisy of let's not do these relatively simple, safe veterinary procedures with antibiotics and pain management and all of that, but let's go rip out your dog's internal organs because that's better.

Dr. Marty Greer:

Right, and so, coming full circle, we can talk about the more invasive procedures. Neutering is somewhat invasive. Spaying is definitely invasive. It doesn't matter if you're a dog or a cat. It's a very invasive procedure. It's an abdominal procedure, and it's one that women would be put in the hospital for for at least a 24-hour period, and it takes full anesthesia and it's a full abdominal procedure, and we are doing that as if it is a minor procedure, and it's not. It's being done by humane societies and other high volume places in large numbers with patients not receiving the level of care.

Even though they're telling you it's high quality, high volume, that's like believing that you can get Ritz Hotel service at a Motel 6 price, and it just doesn't work that way, so our patients are being spayed and neutered when they're too young. They're being spayed and neutered as a matter of course. It's become the norm since the 1970s for us in the United States to think that everything should be spayed or neutered, and the increasing number of articles are being published and documentation that's being developed showing that we see health risks associated with these young spay and neuters, I think we really need to be paying attention to that.

The primary reason that we spay and neuter dogs in the United States is because we are either unable or too lazy to manage our dog and cat's sexual behaviors. They don't do them in Europe, and, if we want to pretend that we want to be like the Europeans and not do tails and ears, then we also need to look at what their thoughts are for spaying and neutering, and they consider these to be mutilation procedures, so, unless the dog has a pyometra, unless the dog has

an ovarian tumor, unless the dog has testicular tumors, there really isn't a reason for us medically to be spaying and neutering our pets.

I have a huge pushback on this, and I work in a practice where many, in fact, most of our patients are not spayed or neutered because we do canine reproduction and feline reproduction, and I've seen for years the things that they've been talking about, so, for 38 years, I've done this, and it's not a surprise to me to say, yes, we see less cancer of the bone, we see less cancer of the spleen, yes, we see less thyroid disease and less urinary incontinence and less obesity and less thyroid disease if our pets are left intact rather than spayed or neutered.

A lot of veterinarians are struggling with this information because it's so contrary to what they've been taught in veterinary school and been told by the public, and really spaying and neutering serves one purpose, and that's population control in the United States, and they don't do it in the European countries, and they have good population control and they don't have these kinds of issues.

Laura Reeves:

We think the reason for the lack of population control issues in Europe is?

Dr. Marty Greer:

Because they know how to manage their pet's behavior. The doggy daycares that we have here that are just everywhere, and everybody thinks that's the cool, trendy thing to do, they won't take dogs that are intact because they don't know how to put them in groups of dogs that are safe to be together when they're in heat, when they're not in heat, when they're the kind of groups that can be appropriate for playgroups, so we have clients that are being forced into doing spays and neuters for political reasons. They go to Thanksgiving dinner and their family says, "What? You didn't spay your dog?" so they feel pressured. They feel pressured by the humane societies and they feel pressured by the media.

It's really difficult for people to understand that there are a lot of benefits to leaving our pets intact, and I don't want to get completely off on this subject except to compare it to the fact that this is an invasive procedure that's elective, as in almost every case it's elective, and then we're telling people that they can't have an elective procedure that will keep their dog in their neighborhood because the dog barks so loudly, that the neighbors can't live with it. The owner is then forced to make a decision on do I keep the dog or do I eliminate the dog from my household, and, in reality, the bark softening procedure is a very simple procedure. It's done very briefly under anesthesia. It takes about two minutes under anesthesia. It's a longer time for them to get an EKG than it is to have the procedure done.

We take a very small piece of tissue, about a four-millimeter section of tissue out of each vocal fold surgically. The patients are under full anesthesia. They have an EKG before surgery. They may have blood work before surgery. They're awakened by a technician, and they're sent home with pain management, and these dogs continue to get to have the same fun behavior, because barking is recreational and dogs sometimes like to do it just like we like to talk, so they continue the same behavior. We haven't altered their psyche. We've just softened the noise that comes out of them, so, now, we have a pet that can stay in a household, in a neighborhood where, otherwise, this dog would be eliminated.

Laura Reeves:

The other thing about bark softening particularly, there's almost zero side effects that I'm aware of. Right?

Dr. Marty Greer:

Right. Every now and then, we'll have one that has a little scar tissue that develops and they have a little bit of respiratory distress, but, done well, nearly every dog makes a completely normal recovery and they can go on to have a very nice, happy, enjoyable and softer life.

Laura Reeves:

Right, softer, quieter.

Dr. Marty Greer:

Yeah, softer, much quieter.

Laura Reeves:

I think we can do this for all of the procedures that government officials who are receiving only half of the information that's available are making for us, which, as I said, the head spinning-off part.

Hang tight, guys. We got a little bit of information for you. We'll be right back to the podcast in a minute. Heads up, crew. Join our patrons today. Get immediate access to the support of a closed Facebook chat group, special patrons only episodes, free mentoring sessions and more. Just like the NPR of dogdom, Pure Dog Talk brings you the news, the knowledge and the insight to succeed with your purebred dog. In exchange, our Pure Dog patrons share the love with monthly or annual gifts, and that helps defray the cost of overhead and keeping the MP3s rolling. Hit me up, laura@puredogtalk.com, and I'll hook you up with the details.

Laura Reeves:

Let's give out some real, actual information about some of these other procedures. Declaws. Now, not all of us here as listeners have cats, but we all... This was a stand together or fall apart, right?

Dr. Marty Greer:

Exactly, so we really have to be all on the same page, and we can't be selective about what procedures we're going to have dictated which ones we can't. With declaws, I still think declaws have a wonderful place in the homes of a lot of people. I've had clients come in that have AIDS, HIV, cancer. They're otherwise immunosuppressed, elderly, and, without having a cat declawed, many of these people can't have this cat as their pet.

I have one woman who came in, and her two kittens were running up her nightgown every morning, and she found that to be unsafe for her health, for her skin's health, so she requested declaws on them. I've had many clients that have been elderly and, without a declaw, and the cat would scratch them or someone else that's immunocompromised, a cat scratch can be a serious health concern. Actually there is a disease called cat-scratch fever. It's not just talk.

Laura Reeves:

Yes. Exactly.

Dr. Marty Greer:

It can lead to any kind of infection. It can lead to the inability to keep these patients, these cats as pets, and, again, we get back to the same thing as pre-op. They get an EKG. They have blood work. They have a complete physical exam. They're under full anesthesia. We now use laser for our procedures and post-op pain medication, and, the way that kittens and cats wake up now from surgery after their declaws, these cats are now sitting in their cage overnight because we do keep them over just to make sure that there's not any tracking of any blood around the house. We don't even have to manage them with the laser and the surgical glue that we use, but those cats are sticking their feet out of the cages the night of surgery within four hours of surgery and patting my technicians on the top of the head because they want to get some attention, so, clearly, their feet can't hurt too badly if they're sitting forward and bopping people on the head with the very foot that they just had surgery on, and it makes a huge difference.

It's not just about your furniture. It's not just about your stereo speakers or your curtains. It's really about your own personal health and your ability to keep pets in a lifestyle that, otherwise, you may be restricted on because your doctor may simply say, "I'm sorry. A cat in your life is dangerous, and we just can't have that happening," so I really think that it's time for us to sit up and pay notice to what's going on around us and realize what's happening.

Laura Reeves:

Before we move on to a couple of the other procedures, I think it's important to tie in the information that's coming from HABRI, the Human Animal Bond Research Institute, that talks about the importance of animals in our lives and how they literally extend our lives, and so all of the things that we can do to enable people to keep pets with them is of benefit to the human condition.

Dr. Marty Greer:

Oh, yes, yeah, there's definitely research, and everyone is probably aware of the quality of life changes, the kind of activity that people are forced into maintaining when the dog gets you up in the morning and drags you out for a walk. It's much healthier for you than if you sit home and eat a big doughnut instead, so our pets do serve a lot of value. They serve as social lubricant, so, if we're out walking our dog or having interactions with other people with our pets, there's so many health benefits that we have been taught to see, and then, for us to say we're going to restrict some of these procedures so you no longer can have this pet, it flies in the face of common sense.

Laura Reeves:

Right. Exactly, and, moving on to some of the other procedures, tail docks, I think it's fascinating. You and I both come from dog breeds that were docked for a specific reason. There's the whole preservation breeding piece, but I also think it's quite fascinating using the case study in Scotland where the government demanded that dogs no longer be docked, and, the data, the research that came back from those dogs that were working dogs that were no longer docked made them change that law.

Dr. Marty Greer:

Right, and there's definitely benefits to it. I've had a number of dogs that have come into the practice that have cracked their tails open, and they're very difficult to get to heal, and sometimes then, as adult dogs, we're doing a major procedure on them, because taking the tail off of an adult dog is a big deal. Taking it off of a three-to-five-old puppy is a very quick procedure, and, again, we use local anesthesia. We don't do this without managing their pain.

In our practice, we use Karo Syrup ahead of the procedure because there was a study done in pigs that showed that, if they had a higher glucose, their cortisol levels were lowered, indicating that their stress levels were lowered when they had some of these procedures done, so all of our puppies will end up with a local block, and we have Karo Syrup, and then right back on mom to nurse, so we're very attentive to the fact that we need to be careful that we minimize their stress.

I don't do their tails until they're gaining weight because I want to make sure that they're off to a good start and we don't diminish their ability to nurse or anything else by doing the tails, and, again, if it's done in a veterinary office, we have sterile instruments. We have appropriate suture. We have appropriate scrubs and preps for our procedures, so we wear sterile gloves, so it's not the kind of barbaric procedure that used to be done out on the farm.

Laura Reeves:

It was actually one of my mentors in Wire Hair Pointers that described to me how she did tails, and I was just... Even I was bug-eyed. I'm like, "Yeah. No, that's not how that's going to go." I mean, it's very old school, but I don't know that people out there in the world, regular people, I don't know that they understand that that's not how it's done.

Dr. Marty Greer:

Right, and Mike Rowe of Dirty Jobs did a tremendous piece, if you ever have a chance to find it, that compared doing... I think it was a castration on a sheep versus banding a sheep, and the comparison, the sheep that had bands put on the scrotum for removing the testicles limped away and looked pretty pathetic, and the lamb that had the testicles cut leaped out of their arms and went sprinting across the pasture as if nothing had ever happened to it, so it is an interesting look at livestock as well, and I think that we have to realize that this is also going to impact our livestock industry, and there are reasons in that industry that we do tails.

We do tails in lambs to keep them from ending up with fly strike, which is maggots around the rectum, really disturbing and dangerous and can be life-threatening disorder. Our tails are docked in our dogs for a reason, so it's not just recreational. It's not just that it's breed type. It's not just how we want them to look. There is actually a functional reason to do these procedures.

Laura Reeves:

A much more functional reason to do a tail dock than to do a spay, for example.

Dr. Marty Greer:

Exactly, because there is no functional reason to do a spay. It's purely for our convenience, so that we don't have to mess around with managing our pets' sexual behaviors.

Laura Reeves:

Exactly, and it's interesting, and you and I had this conversation, and I think it's fair to acknowledge that what we're less familiar with we're less sure about, but I... When I was talking to people about ear crops, because that's not something I have in my breeds, and trying to understand the process and the procedure and what was important and why it was important, they made a comment to me that I thought was really interesting. Dogs in the wild like wolves, coyotes, jackals, dingoes, go figure, all have erect ears. That is the natural state of the canid, if you will.

Dr. Marty Greer:

Right. Right, and, if you look at the 30-pound quintessential street dog that you see in many of the Third World countries around the world, it's a 30-pound, short-coated, brown dog with a curled tail and an upright ear, and, eventually, all dogs end up going back to that kind of appearance if they're not kept as purebred dogs, so, yeah, an erect ear has a function. It allows them to hear better. It reduces ear infections. It cuts down on the number of ear injuries that they have during the kinds of hunting behaviors that they have to have to hunt for their food or compete with one another, so there's absolutely reasons for them to have an erect ear.

Laura Reeves:

Absolutely, and I've watched enough Doberman ear postings now and Manchesters and a few other breeds. It is amazing to me. Those ears are not sensitive at all. I mean, I was surprised. Okay, I'm going to admit it. This was when I was like, okay, and, being around it, you'd come to understand this is not... I mean, the dogs are not fazed by it.

Dr. Marty Greer:

No, they cruise right through it, and it really is a thing that we have to look at is we've bred dogs in the breeds that have crops to have a certain type of ear set so that they're easier to get to stand, and, if you stopped doing ear crops, you get things that look like the Flying Nun for ears on your schnauzers, so they no longer hang down. They now stick out to the sides and then hang down, and they look very bizarre, so it's not just breed type. It's not just appearance that we're looking at. There's absolutely reasons that we do these procedures.

Laura Reeves:

I do want to focus on breed type and appearance because we are preservation breeders, so I believe, my opinion, speak to me on this, we as breeders and members of society should have the opportunity to own the dog that looks and functions the best as the fit for our family.

Dr. Marty Greer:

Yes, I agree. We have dogs that are going to live with us for 15 years, and, when I go to buy a car, I don't go blindfolded. I get to go and pick out the style, the size, the color, the shape, the speed, all the things that I want my car to be for me, and I think we should be able to do the same with our dogs. When you go to the shelter and end up having to get whatever happens to be there, you don't know what it's going to turn out to be.

I had a client that wanted a small-breed dog to replace a fairly good-sized Labrador that she'd had in the past, and I picked it out for her at a training session for procedures that we did down at the veterinary school, and he was just this adorable little dog, and I figured he'd be about 40 pounds when he grew up, and he turned out to be 140, so...

Laura Reeves:

Oh, dear God.

Dr. Marty Greer:

... it didn't exactly meet her needs, so I think-

Laura Reeves:

You're a trained professional, dude.

Dr. Marty Greer:

Yeah, I know. I thought I knew what I was doing, so we have to look at the size, the coat character, the activity level, their indoor activity versus their outdoor activity, how social they are with other people and other dogs, and those are all things that are predictable based on breed and based on family heritage, and it allows people to be much more accurate in their selection. If dogs end up not meeting our needs, they ended up going back to the shelter or end up being euthanized, and, really, those are very difficult things to have to do, and the same thing with the dogs that bark too much, and the same thing with the cats that scratch too much. They end up back at the shelter, and many times they never find an appropriate forever home because their behaviors are such that people can't live with them. I really think it's unfair for us to not allow people to select what they want.

In the United States, our ancestors came here because we wanted freedom to make these decisions ourselves. The Europeans stayed behind because they were a little less demanding, but our heritage in the US is a whole bunch of people who were pretty determined to get their way, and that's who we still are today. We're Americans. We're different than the rest of the world, and I think we need to recognize that freedom, that we're going to lose a lot of this if we start to count out, and the legislation is happening. They'll start off with something like no tail docking in cows in New Jersey. How many cows are in New Jersey that this is going to affect? The humane societies and the legislative people, sources that want to put legislation through, know that, in states without a lot of agriculture, they can get these bills passed, and then they move to the next state and the next state and the next state and, pretty soon, then they're encroaching on things that are happening in the Midwest where we have our livestock industry.

As soon as we start down this slippery slope, we lose every freedom that we have, so I really want people to stand up and participate in legislative bills that pertain to livestock, that pertain to things that don't necessarily just influence them directly because it's going to be the spillover. It's going to be the slippery slope, that what happens next, and the unintended consequences of the legislation that gets passed, for one thing, is going to end up passed on to the next.

Laura Reeves:

You're absolutely right, and we're seeing it in New York State as we speak, so, listeners, your legislative job, January 1, as soon as you all get back to work, start calling up your local representative, your state senator, your state representative, whoever it is, and help them understand. Use some of these talking points. Use some of this information. Help them understand in a rational, a logical and unemotional, no-screaming-and-calling-of-names way why this is important.

Dr. Marty Greer:

Right. Let them know who you are. Get to know them before there's a bill in front of them so that they know that you're someone that's trustworthy, that's logical, that has science behind what you're talking about. Go to the NAIA website. They're going to have a lot of great talking points for you.

We just had this in our meeting two days ago, so we're going to be expanding on what's there. We're going to put up a video of what it looks like to do a debark because I want people to actually see the size of the piece of tissue that comes out, how long the procedure takes, how un-invasive it is. It's just through the oral cavity. There's no other incision made. I want people to witness this firsthand.

When I have veterinary students here, I show them these procedures, that a four-millimeter piece of tissue is snipped out of that vocal fold. It is not done with putting a pipe down their throat the way that people are going to tell you, but we don't want to go back to the same kinds of things that happened when abortions happened on back streets because women didn't get them legally, so we start to have to realize that, if we can do these procedures medically in an appropriate setting with appropriate medical care, it's much safer for everyone involved, for the owner, for the pet, for the veterinarian, for everyone, and I don't want veterinarians to be bamboozled into not being able to do procedures that are medically appropriate for their patients.

Laura Reeves:

Absolutely. Perfect. Okay, Marty, thank you so much. Merry Christmas and happy New Year, and I very much look forward to continuing to visit with you on the Veterinary Voice next year.

Dr. Marty Greer:

Sounds great. Thank you for having me.

As always, if you have any questions or input, we'd love to hear from you. The show notes and links to resources on today's topic are available at puredogtalk.com. Drop us a note in the comments or email to laura@puredogtalk.com. Remember, guys, this podcast is for you, so, if you want to know something, give me a holler. We'll do a podcast for you. If you wouldn't mind, you could help me out here. Take a couple of minutes to visit iTunes and give us a review.

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That's all for today. Thank you for joining us on Pure Dog Talk.