

MEDIA RELEASE

The Australian Veterinary Association



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Mental illness in shelter dogs needs treatment

In response to allegations of misuse of medication in an animal shelter in Victoria, the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA), says the treatment of mental illness in dogs is not black and white.

"Mental illness in animals is displayed through behavioural problems. Just as it is in people, it can be a complex problem to treat," said AVA spokesperson Dr Jacqui Ley.

"Some animals are genetically pre-disposed to mental illness, some develop it as a response to a stressful past or being placed in a stressful environment.

"The prevalence of mental illness among dogs is similar to humans, with one in seven animals suffering from the condition.

"A dog with behaviour problems may be considered a bad dog or one that just needs training and some dogs are surrendered to shelters because of their difficult behaviour. Other dogs find the shelter environment very distressing and may develop problems over the time they are in the shelter. So it comes as no surprise that the prevalence of mental health problems is much higher in shelter environments," she said.

"Managing mental health requires a multifactorial approach of environmental enrichment, specific exercises to encourage calm and relaxed behaviour and medication. Using appropriate medication to reduce anxiety is not a bad thing and is actually required by law where there is evidence that an animal is in unreasonable pain or is suffering.

"Medications used in shelters are not usually for sedation, but are targeted at reducing anxiety so the dog is in a better mental state to cope with the stressors of the environment.

"This type of medication can also create an opportunity for these stressed dogs to learn new coping skills."

Dr Ley said that no qualified vet would provide medication to animals unless it was warranted.

"Only a vet can make a proper diagnosis and provide appropriate medication for mental disease in animals. This is often supported by other behaviour-modifying activities.

"In shelters, going for a walk in a group setting is sometimes not the right course of action for an individual dog. Fearful dogs should be given time to bond with one or

two carers, free of other dogs, to find their confidence and be gradually reintroduced into a safe and trustworthy world,” she said.

“In a time when the medical health profession is encouraging better understanding of mental illness in humans and the role that medication plays as part of a multi factorial treatment plan, we hope that the same can be applied to animals.”

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The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) is the national professional association of veterinary surgeons in Australia. Founded in 1921, the AVA today represents 8000 members working in all areas of animal science, health and welfare.