

21<sup>st</sup> June 2022

Standing Committee on State Development

**RE: Supplementary Submission to Inquiry into QLD Animal Care & Protection Act Amendment Bill 2022**

Animal Care Australia (ACA) would like to thank the QLD State Development & Regional Industries Committee for the opportunity to provide testimony for this Inquiry.

ACA would like to clarify for the Committee what **'Operant Conditioning'** is, as it is important in formulating your report and recommendations. B.F. Skinner's Theory of Operant Conditioning, has 4 quadrants of Positive Reinforcement (R+), Negative Reinforcement (R-), Negative Punishment (P-) and Positive Punishment (P+). Skinner was scientific man, the terminology reflects that, but unfortunately for us, it is not self-explanatory.

Dog Training QLD and Professional Dog Trainers Aust were very clear, consistent and concise in their use of Operant Conditioning terminology in the testimony relating to prong collars, but we note, they did not have the opportunity to define the terminology for the Committee's benefit.

We believe the correct use of the terminology should have flowed just as easily from other peak dog clubs throughout the hearings. We were dismayed and deeply concerned to hear Dogs QLD witnesses, who admitted they have no experience with prong collars, claim:

*"it's designed to give negative reinforcement to the dog by causing pain to that dog"*

*"designed to cause harm or distress to the dog"*

*"when you're talking about negative training practices, and prong collars are in that category, we wouldn't be supporting that"*

*"If you're inflicting pain upon a dog, or negative reinforcement, for want of a better term, I'm likely to believe that is only going to cause confusion to the dog"*

*"The only justification I see that makes any sense at all, where they're saying that the alternative is using negative reinforcement upon a dog, and I'm not necessarily talking about a pronged collar, I'm talking about negative reinforcement generally, because the only alternative is to euthanase the dog"*

Pet Professional Guild, who are also unfamiliar with prong collars, stated

*"these devices work on punishment training techniques ... on positive punishment"*

*"It is a punishing tool to the dog"*

*"The dog doesn't know when the pressure is going to be applied"*

*"I come from using punishment over to using positive reinforcement"*

Both witnesses appeared to:

- 1) use the word "punishment" - as in deliberately inflicting pain - in a colloquial sense and **not** as defined in B.F. Skinner's Theory of Operant Conditioning
- 2) confuse negative reinforcement with "punishment" - by incorrectly assuming negative equates to "bad", and extrapolating that therefore prong collars are bad.

For ACA, there appears to be a very poor comprehension of animal training methods within companion animal associations themselves. The very organisations claiming to educate the public. Operant Conditioning is the sound foundation for all modern animal training, and is well understood by any educated animal trainer. The basics are taught to vets, vet nurses and animal keepers in their animal handling training, and to animal owners through puppy schools, and animal sporting clubs (agility, pony club etc).

ACA anticipates misleading interpretations of animal behaviour and training from animal rights/animal protection activists (such as the Animal Defenders Office and Aust. Alliance for Animals) and we disregard their testimony as irrelevant in this context, particularly given it is based on anthropomorphising their own ideologies, and not on proven scientific research.

The terms Negative and Positive do NOT equal bad and good, but simply removing something or adding something, in a mathematical sense.

A Reinforcement increases the behaviour re-occurring, and Punishment decreases it. Reinforcement does not necessarily involve food.

So, to be absolutely clear:

- ✓ **Positive Reinforcement (R+)** refers to adding something so the animal will repeat the behaviour
- ✓ **Negative Reinforcement (R-)** takes something away so that the animal will repeat the behaviour
- ✓ **Positive Punishment (P+)** adds something so the animal will stop the behaviour
- ✓ **Negative Punishment (P-)** takes something away that the animal will stop the behaviour

Some examples:

- ✓ **R+ : when the dog sits on command, the handler gives him (adds) his favourite toy.**  
**When the rabbit comes when called, she is given a food treat.**
- ✓ **R- : the rider on a horse squeezes the horse with her legs, when the horse moves forward, the rider releases (removes) the pressure.**  
**The handler pulls back on the leash, and when the dog stops, the pressure is released.**
- ✓ **P+ : the zap of an electric fence (adds) when the cow touches it.**  
**When the cat jumps on the kitchen counter, he is squirted with water from a spray bottle.**
- ✓ **P- : the kitten bites while playing, so the owner stops playing with the kitten (removes) and ignores her.**  
**When the dog chews his owner's shoes, the shoes are taken away.**

All dog collars, including prong collars, are a **NEGATIVE REINFORCER**, NOT a Positive or Negative Punishment. The prong collar is used in the same way that a plain collar is - to release pressure when the desired behaviour is achieved. The prong design prevents choking of the dog, breaks old behaviour patterns, and allows them to think, rather than react.

"Punishing" an animal without purpose, such as hitting a dog because the owner is angry, to inflict pain on an animal, **has no training benefit**, and is simply abuse. This abuse already has enforceable provisions in the Act to address it.

All 4 quadrants are important and useful in animal training, even if they are not utilised with equal frequency. Positive Reinforcement is always preferred, but not always effective with every animal. Many animals cannot be trained using food due to having being starved in the past, or even with a toy or affection reward due to what is known as Resource Guarding (protecting what they have out of fear).

Negative Reinforcement often referred to as "Pressure and Release" is utilised almost exclusively with horses of all kinds, from racing to pony club. Riding is a tactile communication, where pressure is used to guide the horse around trails or competitions. Only the incompetent or egotistical cause any pain. Modern trainers using Positive Reinforcement with horses, even though the results are just as effective, are often ridiculed.

Positive Punishment, in the Operant Conditioning sense, when used correctly and not emotionally, also its place. Despite being considered the last resort quadrant most trainers would employ, it should not be denigrated as we saw by some of the hearing witnesses. A good example of effective Positive Punishment is electric fencing. Even people learn not to touch the electric fence after their first introduction, without being traumatised or harmed by the lesson. The fence gives the recipient a minor scare, and no one chooses to do it again (lesson learned!) **but it doesn't actually hurt**. It is all low voltage. It is not intended to hurt. The important key to Positive Punishment is that the animal must be free to make choices to avoid the Punishment in future, such as not touching the fence. As most animals have a healthy respect for electric fencing, its actually the safest fencing to have, as animals don't rub, play with or climb through electric fencing. This includes Hidden Fence, not just horse and livestock fencing.

While we would love for all animals to respond perfectly to a food reward alone, and outlaw all other quadrants of Operant Conditioning from our animal's lives, this ideology is naively misguided and unrealistic.

We all experience all 4 quadrants in our lives, intentionally or unintentionally and we learn something from all of these experiences for better or worse. Our animals experience life through similar experiences, often by our sides.

We have a responsibility as animal owners to help explain our world and expectations to our pets in ways they can understand, to help them make good choices.

No single quadrant is always appropriate for all situations, and animal trainers need the tools available to ensure that all animals can be helped and retrained when needed to feel safe and comfortable in this human centric world, regardless of their past experiences.

Our point here is not really about the tool (the prong collars), but it is to highlight the desperate need for **education over regulation**. Banning prong collars will do nothing to improve animal owners' understanding of animal behaviour or how to train them. It will limit the tools available to the real experts who are the ones resolving the issues this lack of education created in the first place.

From ACA's perspective, we would like to see reduced euthanasia rates, fewer surrenders, higher rehoming rates, and fewer cruelty complaints. Limiting the available tools, while failing to address the real issue here, the lack of education, would be a huge failing of the Animal Welfare review and more importantly of the animals.

We again thank you for this opportunity, and welcome any questions from the Committee.

Kind regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "M Donnelly". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Michael Donnelly  
President, Animal Care Australia.

