

Canine behaviour problems in Brazil: a review of 180 referral cases

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Abstract

Background Behavioural case loads may vary due to cultural differences, and so it is important to know how these differ with geography.

Methods One hundred and eighty dog cases referred to a veterinary behaviourist in São Paulo (Brazil) during the period of 2008–2014 are described.

Results Aggression against people was the most common behavioural complaint (22.2 per cent of the cases), followed by apparent fears and phobias (13.3 per cent). Forms of aggression against other dogs (12.2 per cent) and repetitive behaviours (11.1 per cent) were third and fourth most frequent, respectively. Female and male patients were equally reported (47.6 and 52.4 per cent, respectively). These results differ slightly from the findings of other international studies, in which aggression was the main behavioural complaint with fears and phobias less common.

Conclusion Regional demographic reviews of the case loads of veterinary behaviour specialists help the profession recognise the problems of most concern to pet owners in a given area and thus local priorities, as well as opening up the potential to generate new hypotheses relating to the reasons for regional differences.

Even though Brazil has the second largest population of owned dogs in the world (ie, 52 million dogs),¹ canine veterinary behaviour is a very recent specialty in the country and studies of the prevalence of behavioural problems of domestic dogs are limited. Such data would reveal those areas for which there is most demand for a service and perhaps shed light on the behavioural issues with greatest impact on human carers, since these are the cases for which they are willing to seek specific professional help. A better understanding of regional prevalence allows us to make comparisons with other demographics which can help identify potential knowledge and training priorities for the profession, and potentially gives insight into cultural factors that affect the development or presentation of problem behaviours.

One hundred and eighty cases of dog behaviour problems referred to a veterinary behaviourist (DR, under the supervision of DSM and ARJ) in the city of São Paulo (Brazil) during a six-year period (2008–2014) are described. Behavioural consultations were usually held in the residence of the dog owners and data relating to the dog's sex, age, breed, reproductive status (ie, intact or neutered) and main behavioural complaint leading to referral as reported by the owners were recorded. Secondary complaints, meaning other minor behaviour problems mentioned by the owners during consultation, were not considered in the calculation of the prevalence of behavioural problems since we focused on the complaints leading owners to seek help from a veterinary behaviourist. In cases of aggression between resident dogs, the data of all dogs involved were considered.

Of the 180 canine behaviour cases described in terms of the main behaviour issue, 176 are also considered according to gender, breed, age and reproductive status for a total of 187 dogs (52.4 per cent males and 47.6 per cent females). The four remaining cases (ie, aggression towards familiar dog cases) were not analysed because their records were incomplete.

The age of the dogs varied between four months and 14 years, with a mean of 4.3 years (median=three years). 64.2 per cent of the dogs were purebred (German shepherd dogs, dachshund, poodle, lhasa apso, shih

Veterinary Record (2019) doi:10.1136/vetrec-2019-105539

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Provenance and peer review Not commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

Received May 3, 2019

Revised October 9, 2019

Accepted November 29, 2019

tzu and English bulldog were the most common breeds) whereas 35.8 per cent were crossbreeds. 76.5 per cent of the dogs were neutered (63.3 per cent of the males and 91 per cent of the females).

Canine aggression was the most common complaint, representing 62/180 (34.4 per cent) of the cases. These cases included aggression towards people (40 cases, 22.2 per cent—ranked first by frequency) and aggression towards dogs (22 cases, 12.2 per cent—ranked third by frequency). The second most frequent problem was reports of specific fears and phobias, which accounted for 24/180 cases (13.3 per cent) (eg, fear of specific objects or surfaces, fear of going outside, and so on) with the majority of them (n=13) being dogs with apparent fear/phobia of noises (fireworks and/or thunderstorms). There were 20 cases (11.1 per cent) involving repetitive behaviours (16 involving repetitive self-licking, 1 flank suckling, 1 chasing shadows, 1 case of ingestion of non-food items (ie, pica) and 1 circling behaviour accompanied by tail chasing and biting).

Training problems were the fifth most frequent primary complaint occurring in 16/180 cases (8.9 per cent). These included 13 cases of specific uncontrolled behaviour (jumping on people, stealing objects) and three cases of restless dogs with several uncontrolled behaviours, whose owners reported them as hyperactive, with excessive levels of energy and/or agitation. Inappropriate elimination (n=14 cases, 7.8 per cent), problems related to being separated from the owner (n=13 cases, 7.2 per cent), excessive barking (n=10 cases, 5.5 per cent) and coprophagy (n=7 cases, 3.9 per cent) were the least frequent behavioural reasons for visits. Other behaviour problems made up the remaining 14 cases (7.8 per cent) These were: six puppy consultations, two consultations requesting a dog temperament test, three cases involving age-related decline in behaviour (eg, cognitive dysfunction), one consultation for guidance on living with a dog that has become visually impaired, one case involving problems in adapting a dog to a 'day care' service and one case of depressed behaviour in a recently adopted dog.

The present survey is the first report of the most common canine behavioural problems from the perspective of a veterinary behaviourist in Brazil. The finding of aggression towards people and fears and phobias being the most frequently complaints is in partial agreement with other previously published international case loads.²⁻⁵ In all studies, including the current one, aggression towards people is the most common problem encountered by specialists.

However, we found a different relative prevalence in relation to the second most commonly reported problem, which in Brazil related to what appeared to be a specific fear or phobia. By contrast, in the survey by Denenberg *et al*³ anxiety was the second most common primary problem or secondary complaint (21 and 22 per cent, respectively); for Bamberger and Houpt²

anxiety-related problems was the second most reported issue, particularly separation anxiety; with problems related to fears and phobias being much less prevalent.

The city of São Paulo, in which the cases occurred, is very crowded and noisy, with fireworks used regularly throughout the year, in different situations and at different times of the day. The high prevalence of problems related to fears and phobias in the present study leads us to believe that, at least in part, this environment may be affecting dogs: sensitising and dishabituating them to the noise and not habituating them to it, perhaps because of the intensity of many firework displays. This environment might also result in increased owner awareness of the problem. Early socialisation and training programmes seem to be uncommon in Brazil, and perhaps owners are only seeking assistance for their dogs' training/behaviour when problems have already developed. Thus, environmental conditions together with owner attitudes in big Brazilian cities, such as São Paulo, may help explain why noise fear and phobias are so common. It is worth mentioning that in an Australian case load³ fears and phobias were also very frequent, thus it would be worth exploring the environmental similarities between São Paulo and Sydney, from which the Australian case load was derived.

Separation-related problems were less prevalent in the present case load. This is not consistent with some other international surveys^{2,3} but in agreement with others.⁵ However, in the only related survey of its kind in Brazil, Soares *et al*⁶ reported separation anxiety signs in 55.9 per cent of 93 Brazilian-owned dogs living in Rio de Janeiro. Either there are marked differences between these cities, or, more likely, many cases are either passing unnoticed or not receiving the specialist care that occurs in other countries.

Aggression towards other dogs accounted for 12.2 per cent of cases, which is broadly in line with other surveys,²⁻⁵ but a slightly lower prevalence in the present case load. This may be due to several reasons: it might be that in Brazil interdog aggression is still seen by many as a training problem leading owners to seek the help of dog trainers rather than behaviour specialists, or that these dogs are simply kept separated, abandoned or recommended for euthanasia without first seeking a specialist for help. Indeed, in the national survey by Soares *et al*⁷ with Brazilian veterinary clinicians, canine aggression was reported to be the most frequent behavioural cause of abandonment or euthanasia.⁷

The significant presentation of repetitive behaviours is somewhat at odds with studies conducted in other countries such as the USA, Canada, UK and Australia.^{2,3,5} In all of these surveys, problems related to repetitive behaviour did not occupy a prominent position on the list of behavioural complaints. One of the reasons for this remarkably high number of cases is perhaps the tendency for many owners to live in a small

indoor environment in a city like São Paulo city, and/or very long periods of solitude. This is an area in need of further research.

Training issues accounted for 8.9 per cent of the cases. Lack of socialisation and training programmes for puppies in Brazil is likely to contribute to this problem, with the result that owners end up more frequently looking for specialised help for issues associated with poor behavioural development and training. However, trainers rather than veterinary behaviourists may be the first professionals from whom they seek help, as veterinary behavioural medicine is not yet a well-established discipline in Brazil. More studies at a national level are needed in order to elucidate this matter further.

Problems related to ageing (eg, cognitive dysfunction), adaptation to 'day care' and depressed behaviour were less commonly seen. Along with six preventive consultations for puppies, two requests for temperament testing and one consultation for guidance regarding living with a dog who had become visually impaired. These amounted to 7.8 per cent of the cases seen. It may be that these cases represent less worrying issues for owners, or that they are complaints for which the solution may be found from other sources such as a primary care veterinarian.

It is important to consider that the aforementioned international case loads²⁻⁵ may differ between them and from this study in terms of behaviour classification (eg, descriptive v motivational-emotional based diagnoses). It would be necessary to standardise behaviour classification in order for more accurate comparisons between case loads to be made, but currently there is no agreed taxonomy for veterinary behaviour diagnosis. Our classification was based on owner presenting complaints, but others have been based on professional diagnosis.⁵ While owner complaint shows what owners are worried about, diagnosis shows what is professionally believed to be happening; both are of value.

Important regional differences compared with the rest of the world are reported here, but these deserve replication with the case loads of other specialists in

Brazil especially considering how large and racially mixed the country is. A culture with greater use of fireworks throughout the year as well as the modern lifestyle of city animals which may frustrate and restrict them may result in a unique profile of behaviour complaints, increasing the risk of problems such as noise fear and repetitive behaviours. São Paulo is the largest and the most heterogeneous city in Brazil with thousands of migrants and an estimated population of 12 million inhabitants.⁸ We hope further Brazilian behaviour case loads are therefore published which will help us answer the question to what extent the results here are representative of the country.

Acknowledgements We thank FAPESP and CAPES for providing research scholarships for the first author during the period this study was undertaken. We also thank all the owners and their dogs.

Funding This study was funded by Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo (<http://dx.doi.org/10.13039/501100001807>) and Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior (<http://dx.doi.org/10.13039/501100002322>).

Competing interests None declared.

Data availability statement All data relevant to the study are included in the article or uploaded as supplementary information.

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