



Importing rescue dogs into the UK: reasons, methods and welfare considerations

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Introduction

Rescuing dogs from outside the UK is increasing in popularity, but there are risks associated with this practice, including the potential for importation of infectious diseases that are not endemic to the UK. Imported dogs may also suffer from behavioural problems due to the profound change in their environment and lifestyle. However, there have been few studies investigating the health and behaviour of imported rescue dogs.

The aim of this study was to investigate the reasons why people bring rescue dogs into the UK from overseas, the importation process and the potential welfare problems associated with this practice.

Approach

An online questionnaire was distributed to overseas-rescue dog owners via social media in the summer of 2017. The data collected included the demographics of participants, details of the adoption process, the dog's signalment, its health (including diseases tested for) and its behaviour. The responses were then analysed using descriptive statistics for the quantitative data and coding for the qualitative data.

Results

A total of 3080 responses were received, with 93 per cent of these coming from

KEY FINDINGS

- Owners of dogs adopted from abroad overwhelmingly reported their dogs as being imported, incorrectly, under the EU Pet Travel Scheme rather than the more stringent Balai Directive.
- Participants primarily chose to adopt from abroad rather than the UK based on their desire for a particular dog they had seen advertised and concern for its situation, but some had previously been refused dogs from UK rescue centres.

female participants. Dogs were reported to have been imported from 44 countries, but most of them originated from Romania (34 per cent), Cyprus (22 per cent) and Spain (19 per cent). The majority of these dogs (61 per cent) were put up for adoption after being found living on the street. Most were reportedly imported under the EU Pet Travel Scheme (89 per cent), while only 1 per cent were reportedly imported under the Balai Directive. However, some participants (8 per cent) did not know how their dog was imported.

Dogs were typically sourced via social media, and the primary reason for adoption was that owners came across a particular dog and wanted it. Motivations to adopt from overseas included perceptions of the greater suffering of dogs from abroad compared with dogs from the UK and fear of the dog being killed. Some participants had tried adopting from the UK but had been refused due to their working hours or because they have children.

Although severe behavioural difficulties were rare, common behavioural problems reported in imported dogs included fear of strange noises/objects (82 per cent),

poor recall (71 per cent), pulling on the lead (68 per cent) and fear of strangers (66 per cent).

Most participants believed that their dog had a full veterinary health check, antiparasitic treatments and a rabies test before importation. However, 20 per cent said their dog was imported to the UK with known health conditions, including traumatic injury (19 per cent) and leishmaniosis (9.1 per cent). Participants showed uncertainty regarding knowledge of disease tests performed, and many did not know whether their dog was tested for leishmaniosis, ehrlichiosis, *Dirofilaria immitis* or babesiosis.

Interpretation

The findings of this study indicate that vast numbers of dogs are potentially being incorrectly imported into the UK under the EU Pet Travel Scheme. This suggests a lack of understanding of the laws relating to the importation of rescue dogs from abroad.

Although most adopters believed their dog had a full veterinary health check before importation, many were unclear about what infectious diseases the dog had been tested for. Checks during the importation process should, therefore, be more stringently applied to minimise the risk of exotic diseases entering the UK.

However, this study is limited by its reliance on owner-reported knowledge of importation practices and infectious disease testing. As such, the findings should be interpreted with caution.

Significance of findings

The findings of this study emphasise the importance of clear guidelines on travel laws, and stricter checks on animals imported as rescues, to ensure protection against the importation of diseases that pose a risk to animal and human health in the UK.

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