T R A N S C R I P T

STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Inquiry into the legislative and regulatory framework relating to restricted breed dogs

Melbourne — 18 November 2015

Members

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Witnesses

Professor Grahame Coleman, and
Dr Robert Holmes, Animal Welfare Science Centre, University of Melbourne.

The CHAIR — I declare open the Standing Committee on the Economy and Infrastructure public hearing and extend a welcome to our witnesses present today, as well as people present in the gallery. I remind everybody that the committee is today hearing evidence in relation to the restricted breed dogs inquiry and today's evidence is being recorded. I remind our witnesses this afternoon that all evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege; therefore you are protected against any action for what you say in here today, but if you were to go outside and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by the same privilege. I invite our witnesses this afternoon to introduce themselves. State your name and the capacity in which you come before the committee today, and then I will ask you to go to your opening comments. Over to you.

Prof. COLEMAN — My name is Grahame Coleman. I am a psychologist and a professor in the faculty of veterinary science and agriculture at the University of Melbourne, and I am a researcher within the Animal Welfare Science Centre. I am here to make a submission in regard particularly to our views on the nature of dangerous dogs, dog breed issues and so on and in particular to make a few comments about the research — and lack of — in the literature and the imperatives for some background research to be done to inform this debate.

Dr HOLMES — I am Robert Holmes. I am a veterinary and animal behaviour graduate. I run an organisation called Animal Behaviour Clinics. I am associated with the Animal Welfare Science Centre as an honorary fellow of the University of Melbourne and also chair of their advisory committee at the Animal Welfare Science Centre, and I also sit on the board. I am involved with supervision of a PhD candidate and have a great interest clinically and feel the need for serious research to be done into aggressive interactions, because they are a part of my clinical interest.

The CHAIR — I will hand over to whomever would like to begin with the introductory comments, and then once you have both had an opportunity to make any introductory comments you might like, we will move into some questions from the committee.

Prof. COLEMAN — Thank you very much. I would like to preface the more detailed comments I would like to make by just commenting on some of the conceptual issues in this whole debate. On the one hand, the distinction is not often made between dog bites and injuries that lead to hospitalisation. There is a great likelihood that there is a substantial under-reporting of dog bites, and that is important because the injury component is the one that receives publicity and leads to medical and health issues, but in terms of aggressive behaviour of the animals, small dogs that are aggressive generally speaking do not inflict injuries that are likely to lead to hospitalisation. That distinction between dog bite and injury seems to me an important one.

The second thing relates to the issue of breed versus risk. Physical size is a substantial component of the capability of a dog to inflict injury. Therefore that will tend to obscure differences in actual aggressive behaviour and bites, albeit maybe ones that do not lead to hospitalisation. As a risk factor, we live in a country where rabies is not an issue, so small bites do not loom large in our thinking but nevertheless can be highly prevalent in small breeds. Breed versus risk is just another dimension, I guess, of the entire debate.

The third one, which is a tricky one, is the whole issue of differences between breeds in terms of aggressive behaviour and dog bites. This perhaps leads on to talking a little bit about some of the current literature. I imagine you have had submissions already on a fair bit of this, so I do not want to go over old territory, but one of the key things is that the variability that you observe amongst breeds in aggressive behaviour — leaving aside dog bites for the moment — is no greater than the variation you observe within breeds. The evidence does suggest that there is a heritable component to aggressive behaviour in dogs, but it equally suggests that there is a very strong environmental and human behavioural component. Although the data are not there, there is every reason to expect that to a large extent environment and human behaviour can overcome any inherent component in aggressive behaviour in dogs.

If you look at the literature, one of the problems that we face is that most of it — there are only a few limited exceptions — is based on owner ratings or observational kinds of judgemental data on dog aggression and on the factors that might be associated with that. That means it is hard to know to what extent perceptual biases influence the kinds of reporting that go on and even, for that matter, the identification of breeds. There have been plenty of examples, even in the media, where a particular breed has been associated with an adverse event and it has turned out that in fact the animal involved was an entirely different breed, because the people who are doing the reporting are unable to make that judgement. That is leaving aside the issue that many of the dogs that

are in the community are crossbreeds anyhow, and to decide what particular breed we are talking about can be just a difficult factual issue, let alone what people might say about it.

The other thing is that so far as I am aware there has been no detailed risk analysis of the various contributing factors to dog behaviour. It is pretty clear that there is a public health issue in the case of dog bites. What is less clear or what is less publicised, if you like, are the positive human health benefits from companion animal ownership in dogs in particular. There is a substantial literature — again, some of it is fairly flawed, a bit like the breed literature — to indicate that there are major physical and mental health benefits of companion animals. The physical health benefits — stuff like patting a dog lowers blood pressure, the reduced cardiovascular disease associated with that; you have all that kind of stuff. In any risk analysis that is an important component of trying to decide the trade-offs between dogs and dog behaviour and community benefit or community loss or damage. That does not figure in most of these debates.

That leads to the main point I would want to make about research, and that is that what is needed is some direct research that links all of the relevant components to actual behavioural outcomes in dogs. It would certainly include the risk outcomes — the injury outcomes as well. We already know, based on some of the data, that the most aggressive breeds of dogs tend to be little ones — dachshunds, Jack Russells and so on. Of course being small they are most likely to literally be anklebiters and it would only be on rare occasions when a young child puts their face right next to the dog that that sort of injury is likely to occur.

Linking all of the relevant factors, including the heritable components, which you can do by looking at matched litters and so on; the human components, and that includes things like the environment, the backyard, the opportunities for exercise, play — all those kinds of things; as well as the human components, there is limited data to suggest that there is a relationship between some aspects of human attitudes and personality and dog ownership. The cause and effect relationship is not really known. That is to say, do certain kinds of individuals select dogs that are likely to create higher risk, or is it that when they get a dog the way in which they manage that dog makes it a riskier proposition? That is not really known. It just needs systematic investigation of all these kinds of things. We have talked a bit about this in the submission we made.

Perhaps before I leave that, in terms of outcomes, this information can do two things, really. One is it can inform the debate, so that means in situations like this, where you are trying to make judgements about what is the appropriate course of action and what is the appropriate legislation, you have actually got some concrete data upon which to base it. It also provides an opportunity for public discourse to be informed so that there is some expert advice that can be given to the media or can be given to regulatory bodies or whatever, where that is appropriate to do so. Thirdly, it can be used to inform education programs. I think you have already heard from Bill Bruce, so you are aware of what he has done in Calgary. That kind of proposal, although it is not really based much on science, nevertheless appears to have been reasonably effective. The evaluation was done in house, so it is a little bit uncertain about the value of that, and also the outcomes tended to be dog bites rather than looking at the broader range of outcomes that are probably relevant. Nevertheless, it is indicative that education can be a useful way to go.

How to do that education, though, really does depend on your having a clear understanding of what the mix of factors is. You need to know what to target in dog owners. You need to know what to target, if at all, in breeding programs, or if it became indicated — restriction of breeds — although I suspect that that is very unlikely to be an outcome, and also the kind of environment that dogs should be raised in. In terms of the research and education, one of the broad issues there is just resources. Almost all of the livestock industries have peak bodies that have a R and D component. They get levies from producers, and they use that to inform their research to improve production — and in animal welfare, the sort of stuff that we do in the pig and dairy industries and so on.

That is not true for companion animals. There is a levy on dog licences, and that is used in Victoria for the responsible pet ownership program, which I have been associated with; in fact, did evaluate — we have a paper here that I will leave for you to have a look at on the evaluation of that program — but it was effective. They also introduced another program called We are Family, but so far as I am aware that has not been evaluated. That was designed for pregnant mums to learn how to manage a young child in the context of a family animal. That is the only thing for which that levy is used. It seems to me that it would make a lot of sense, by whatever manageable strategy is available, to provide a resource for research and for translation — education — in the

dog bite area. Whether that means increasing the levy or putting a greater proportion of the levy to a fund for that sort of thing is something for others to judge, but I think it is absolutely essential.

In sum, the bottom line is that what research is out there is indicative but generally speaking not great, particularly in terms of understating causal factors of dog bites or dog-related injuries. The evidence does not seem to suggest that restricting breeds is likely to be the best way to go, other experience suggests that is not a particularly effective strategy either and that appropriate research followed up by a suitable education program may be a strategy to deal with it.

The CHAIR — Excellent. Thanks, Professor. Doctor, is there anything you would like to add on to that initial contribution?

Dr HOLMES — Yes, I would actually, and it is to do with my colleague. He has a habit of hiding his light under his bushel. The committee may wish to be aware that the work that he and Professor Paul Hemsworth, at the Animal Welfare Science Centre did — we have a copy here — was groundbreaking, world-recognised and respected research in two other industries: dairy-cattle and pigs. They looked at the attitudes of stock persons, so the analogy is the owner, looked at the behaviour of the stock person and were able to show statistically that that was related to the productivity of the animal — the dairy cow or the pig — and the welfare of the animal. He has got a track record, which is world ranking — sorry to embarrass you, but he would not tell you this. So we have a model. It is a matter of extrapolating that model, and the experience that lies within his head and Paul Hemsworth's head and also the Animal Welfare Science Centre that could get to grips with this issue as no-one else in the world has done.

There is a combination of expertise here that no-one else has got. The trouble is the funding. I have been trying to encourage the Animal Welfare Science Centre. We have had a number of attempts to get funding in and do companion animal research with a singular lack of success because of the funding model. We have come here today to say to the committee: we can fool around with feelings and opinions and everything, but really where should the effort be directed in terms of education and resources to reduce this human welfare issue of serious dog bite?

It is rather like having a tooth that is aching. You can take Panadol to dampen it down — it would make sense over the weekend — but you really need to get that tooth looked at by a dentist. That is what we are suggesting in the analogy: let us look at the problem and understand the causes. Until we understand the causes, we really do not know what interventions are appropriate.

The CHAIR — Very good. Is that all you would like to say to begin?

Dr HOLMES — I imagine that the committee might want to ask us a few questions.

The CHAIR — Indeed. It certainly does, and it does open questions that — —

Dr HOLMES — If I could just make a point, Chair, I see this whole thing as a human welfare issue, that the dog welfare is important, but ultimately we are talking about reducing serious dog bite to people; right? That is a human welfare issue. There is also the issue of the restrictions that might be put on dogs and people owning dogs. Again the value of dogs in society is a human welfare issue, so it ultimately comes down to human welfare, and that is why I am so glad that you are hearing from a psychologist who understands this stuff, not some grubby veterinary behaviourist who works at a different level.

The CHAIR — Indeed. I am sure the committee does have some questions, but I would like to begin with one in asking, you were talking about research, in terms of how to inform the potential legislative framework that might come out of this inquiry. What could that research look like?

Prof. COLEMAN — I think, as Robert indicated, we have a fairly well established methodology for doing this kind of thing, and in fact we have done some dog work. Paul and myself and a student, Amanda Kobelt, years ago did some direct observational work on dogs in backyards, where we actually installed video cameras. We watched to see what dogs did in the absence of their owners and in the presence of their owners and related that back to how much time they spent indoors and outdoors and so on. It was a really interesting study but very contained. It was part of her PhD program, and even then we struggled to get the resources just to do that.

The methodology that we use for this kind of work is a multidisciplinary thing because it looks at that sequence that Robert alluded to before in the chain of events, if you like, that lead to an outcome. The first thing is to decide what is the outcome we are interested in. Is it dog bites, is it injuries or whatever? But let us assume that we identify maybe three of four indicators that include injury-type outcomes but also include aggressive behaviours, inter-dog aggressive behaviours, stranger behaviours — all that kind of stuff. We have done that sort of work in the past. We identify the outcome variables first.

Then the next thing is to say, 'Okay, if that is the case, what can we identify as factors that are associated? You cannot demonstrate the causality at this stage, but what are the factors?'. We would look at environmental factors. We would look at human factors, and human factors include things like personality, although generally speaking personality, despite what a couple of papers have said, is not a critical issue, but attitude is: the beliefs that people have about how they should manage their dog. Perhaps a background value of duty of care towards pets; the beliefs about training regimes — punishment versus reward, the various kinds of reinforcement. We do, for example, know from the literature that punishment is associated with higher levels of aggression in dogs — using punishment as a training technique — leaving aside anything else. We would be looking at those kinds of factors, as well as what we know about the dogs.

The study that I alluded to before, that we did some years ago, used littermates within a single breed to try to keep the thing nice and tight and scientifically valid. This sort of research we are talking about now, of course, is much more complex than that because you do not have control over the breeds. You do not even have control over the pure versus crossbreeds of various kinds, but that would be factored into it — so as much information as we can get about the history and the breed characteristics of the animals themselves. That is that factor; that is the precursor to looking at the outcome variables. Then we would look at the relationship between all of those.

Once we establish what seem to be the relevant factors in terms of association, then we do interventions. So you would go in and you would say, 'Okay, these are variables we need to target', whatever the research happened to show us, and we use what is called a cognitive behavioural intervention — the psychologist here — which in simple language means target the beliefs that underpin what people do with their dogs and change those by telling them what the science tells us. In the livestock industry we can say to them, 'Look, we know for a fact that if you do X, then one of the outcomes will be that you have lower reproductive performance in your pigs', or, 'Lower milk yield in your dairy cattle' or whatever. We take them through all of that.

Also, because we have measured their beliefs about dogs and managing dogs, we say, 'Look, if you hold these sorts of beliefs, then there is a much greater likelihood that you will have bad outcomes for your dog, so you need to change them. These are the facts; this is what you should do'. Then we would couple that with the behaviours that they need to engage in to deal with that. Those behaviours might be management behaviours, like husbandry-type behaviours; they may be exercise regimes; they might be play behaviour. There is a whole range of things, depending on what the research shows us, that we would target. Having changed those, we would then look to see if we get outcome changes.

Mr FINN — I hear the call for research, and I think obviously research is extremely important. How much research do we need? How long would it take? Given that we have already had one death, we are not exactly patient for action. How far down the track would we have to be before we could make any firm conclusions?

Prof. COLEMAN — The typical time frame for something like this is about two to three years. It is like anything. It depends little bit on how much resources you are prepared to throw at it how quickly you can do it. Some of it is determined by practical issues — getting access to the household and all that sort of stuff. That is the typical time frame. I would make two comments about the time though. Firstly, I do not think that taking action is an all or nothing thing — that is to say, I do not see any reason why you cannot begin by taking what we know from the published literature and developing up an intervention pretty much straightaway. Then as the data becomes available, refining that to improve it. The more specific the data you have in relation to these outcomes, the better the effect. An airy kind of thing will have some effect. The more specific it is, the greater the effect. I do not think the time frame, as I said, is an all or nothing thing. I think you try to do as many things in parallel as you can, but as usual it is dependent very much on resources.

About the death issue, it is such a horrifying prospect, particularly that young children can be killed by a family pet. I would have to say that in the context of the deaths and injuries that occur through road trauma, through family violence, through all of the other things in our community that are major risk factors for these horrible personal outcomes, a time frame of that sort of period in the context of all these other social policies that we are

trying to implement — of three years — is probably not all that long. It is for the person involved of course; yesterday is too late. I think it is worth the investment of that sort of time to get the outcome.

Mr FINN — I think that is a fair enough point, that research is obviously going to add to our string, so to speak. But where should we start now? What should we initiate now in order to build a base to build on?

Prof. COLEMAN — I think there are two things. The first step in the process on the research side is to try to gather that data on the background factors and the associated outcomes in dogs. That is actually done just by doing surveys and by direct observations of the animals — temperament testing or whatever of the animals. That can be done quite quickly, and even though you have not done any of the other stuff, it is a pretty good starting point. You are only looking at 6 to 12 months to do that kind of work, so I would do that. I think there is no reason not to start tooling up though for intervention programs.

Robert just handed me this. This is an evaluation I did of the responsible pet ownership in Victoria, which I guess you are familiar with.

Dr HOLMES — We have copies for you.

Prof. COLEMAN — There are copies there for you. That was a program that was developed really without any underpinning research, but of course the objective of it was to teach kids how best to interact with pets in the home and strange pets — how to approach, to ask permission, to put their hand up and that sort of stuff. We were able to have a look and see what the efficacy of that was, and it turned out, with some limitations, that in fact it was having effect, even with these little kids of five and six years old. That sort of program can be done. How would you do that in Victoria? As always, it entails resources.

If I can speak from a personal point of view — I would hate to attribute this to the Animal Welfare Science Centre or the university — I am of the view that pet owners, but particularly dog owners, although I think it also applies to horse owners actually, should be licensed. So it is not the dog that is licensed, it is the owner that is licensed, and I think to get that there should be some sort of, even if it is fairly rudimentary, hurdle to pay. We do it for drivers licences. We have no difficulty in having somebody go up to the desk, answer 20 questions and get their licence. Why not do that for companion animals?

You could put basic things in there like, what are the basic needs of the animal? What are the exercise needs? What should you do in these circumstances? When should you take a dog to the vet? That sort of stuff. What do you do about worming? Just general things to ascertain that the person has at least got some basic level of competency and understanding of what it entails to own a dog. I do not see why not. Sure, there are some administrative costs for doing that, but councils already administer licences and microchipping. It is not such huge thing to sit that on top, I would not have thought. So as a first step, I reckon that is not a bad way to go, and in my view it is probably a better investment than trying to figure out some punitive system to make people behave.

One thing I did not say earlier is that in my view there is a fair chance that if you make things more restrictive, it will just go underground anyhow, because people have a whole range of motivations for owning dogs. In many cases it is attachment and companionship, and that is nice, but in other cases it is protection and it is other things — hunting, that sort of thing — where the outcome that you are seeking is not a dog that is well house-trained and is a good companion and playful and all those kinds of things.

Mr FINN — Would you licence the pet and the owner or just the owner?

Prof. COLEMAN — Register the pet, of course, through microchipping, because you still need to be able to track the animals. You still need to encourage desexing, all those kinds of things that go with owning a pet, a dog, but the owner as well.

Mr FINN — Does that include desexing?

Prof. COLEMAN — Include desexing?

Mr FINN — Yes — the owner. Just inquiring, because I know a few that would qualify, I can tell you, not looking at anybody in particular.

Prof. COLEMAN — At my age it is probably not an issue!

The CHAIR — Sorry to interrupt, but just following on that same point, elsewhere in the world, do you know of anywhere where licensing of pet owners does exist?

Prof. COLEMAN — No, I do not. Having said that, I am not totally familiar with the regulatory framework in most other countries. Some I know, and as far as I am aware, it is not. There is no question that that would be seen to be a fairly revolutionary thing to do, which is why I am stating it is a personal opinion. Secondly, I am uncertain what the public reaction would be. If you had a good PR firm, and it was put in the same terms as a licence to drive a car or many of the other things where we require licences — boat licences, fishing licences. There are a whole range of things where we require licences, where a person has got to know certain things before they get them. Maybe you could sell it. I do not know.

Dr HOLMES — If I could just pass on an observation, I am not up to date with exactly what is happening now, but I know a number of years ago West Auckland, on an island not far away to the east, actually established a test where dog owners could take this examination for a reduced fee. That could be a gentle introduction to the notion of licensing.

Could I also come back though to the need to have this discussion. It seems to me to be culturally based. Where you talk about desexing, Mr Finn, the Swedes, for instance, have a totally different attitude to dog ownership. So much so — and they are so responsible — they regard desexing as an unnecessary mutilation. Cultural difference — because they responsibly look after their dogs. Entire bitches, entire male dogs are controlled. Why? Because that is culturally expected. That is the norm. Whereas here we do not have that. This is just reminding us that there is in fact a cultural difference behind all this discussion. That cultural difference, I would imagine, could be shifted in time with appropriate education, management, publicity, regulation or whatever. It is ultimately a cultural difference. I do not have the data for Swedish dog bite, but I would be prepared to put good money on the table that it would be a bit less there than what we have.

Ms HARTLAND — I have just a couple of follow-up questions on the issue of licences. I quite like that idea. As someone who has always had a dog and has always got them through rescue — they have always been re-housed dogs, and you have to answer a certain number of questions in that situation — I think it is quite good. How do you think, though, that would help to identify the dog owner that is buying the big dog as a power status? That certain men having that dog is the issue and so they are as much of the problem as the dog is. How do you think it would identify them?

Prof. COLEMAN — I do not see it as a panacea any more than a kid going for a driving licence and then getting a great supercharged V8 and tearing off down the highway. I do not see it as a panacea, but at least it is a start in getting some sort of order in the whole thing. Just as we generally do not have too many unlicensed drivers around and therefore there is are certain minimum level that we expect from drivers, so would be the case with a dog licence. But it does not in any way pre-empt all these other things that I am suggesting. In much the same way as a lot that is voluntary — people can go to driving schools, and often people do, just to get the skills up on snow roads or wet roads or that kind of thing. I am not suggesting that it should be voluntary. I do not think so actually. Nevertheless, there are other applications of this sort of training around.

Ms HARTLAND — With that too, because from time to time you hear of people being banned from owning animals in the future because of welfare issues, should that be something that is more readily applied?

Prof. COLEMAN — In principle I would say, yes. I think in practice it would prove to be not possible to do, mainly because you would need to establish a legally defensible framework that would allow you to stop a person from owning a dog. I guess under circumstances where you have repeat offenders that had large and dangerous dogs that had inflicted injury several times, you could perhaps have some notion of a repeat offender kind of thing, but that would not get rid of most. Most are not like that. Most of them are in households with young kids, known to the family, those sorts of things. That is not going to capture that sort of thing.

Ms HARTLAND — And as legislators obviously we have to find a balance around children's safety, animal welfare and all of those issues, so the kinds of research you are talking about, which I have to say sounds really interesting, and the Calgary model, but all of this is got reasonably long lead times until we could actually do it, so if there were three things, what are the three things that we should have in legislation now to make that transition?

Prof. COLEMAN — I think the first one, which is the least likely to get up, is the licence, because at least that is a minimal standard of knowledge and perhaps you could get some slightly more subtle indicators in there. That would be one. If you could tie that to some sort of education program — in much the same way as you have got to read through the book of road rules — that there were some course that you had to do before you sat for dog licence, that would probably be the second one. That is a pretty rudimentary start, but at least it is a start — those two. To be honest I cannot think of a third one, because I do not think that interventions where you place restrictions, particularly on breeds and that kind of thing, are likely to be especially effective. I am just of the view that human behaviour, generally speaking, is not easily modified by regulation. It is more modified by education.

The CHAIR — Is there anything you would like to add to that, Dr Holmes?

Dr HOLMES — In response? Yes. I think that whatever primary, secondary or tertiary interventions that the committee may decide, what I get out of this and what Grahame has been saying is: whatever is done should be rigorously, objectively scrutinised to see whether it was worth that intervention. What is the data? Okay, why do not we intervene, but let us measure the response to that intervention. Otherwise you are wasting time and doing an unmentionable act. Basically, why bother unless you measure it?

Prof. COLEMAN — Actually that is a good point, and I had not really thought of it. Thanks, Robert. It is possible to gauge the efficacy of these kinds of things. There is a precedent actually, not in terms of evaluation but in terms of seeing the viability of a project, as with the NDIS, where communities were chosen to introduce that. Now, if you took an approach like that, then you could in fact look at matched communities and gauge the efficacy of that sort of thing. So you could actually do some reasonable social research — not as good as doing controlled experiments, but reasonable social research that would allow you to gauge the outcomes.

Ms HARTLAND — So if you took a rural and a city shire, because of the different complexities of the issue — —

Prof. COLEMAN — Or four really — two rural and two city. You would try to match them in demographics and so on as much as you could. Introduce it, give it a year and see how it goes; see what the prevalence of dog bites or even other dog problems are. It is not just dog bites — dogs at large, reported aggressive behaviours and that sort of thing.

Ms HARTLAND — And then if local shires or councils took that on, they would obviously need additional funding to be able to do that for the trial period.

Prof. COLEMAN — Yes, absolutely. At the back of all of this, as it always is, there are resources. I think at some point it is going to be necessary to have a look and see how the registration dollar is spent. Some of it is being used very usefully, like in the responsible pet ownership program, but if we are serious about managing companion animals it has really got to extend to these other aspects.

Ms TIERNEY — Are you familiar with any research that was undertaken leading up to the Calgary model being developed?

Prof. COLEMAN — No, I am not actually. Are you, Robert?

Dr HOLMES — No, I got the impression that Bill's stuff just made sense to him and so he went and did it.

Prof. COLEMAN — Yes.

Ms TIERNEY — That was the impression that I got too.

Prof. COLEMAN — So it is a little bit like what we are suggesting now here, in a sense, is it not? It is doing the best we can with what we currently know.

Ms TIERNEY — With the Calgary model, apart from the licensing and a couple of other issues that we have canvassed this afternoon, what other sort of gaps and improvements do you think could be made to that model?

Prof. COLEMAN — To their model?

Ms TIERNEY — For application here.

Dr HOLMES — Outside validation, for a start.

Prof. COLEMAN — Yes. I think that one of the problems with public education is that the more generic it is and the more it is broadcast, the lower the efficacy. So in other words if you had a mass media campaign to do education, then what you can expect in the short term is very little change. Maybe over a generation you will get change, but in the short term you do not. What they proposed in that model was some pretty targeted training — veterinarians and regulators and so on were all part of it. Then you can probably expect those guys to implement the message fairly quickly, but in terms of the public you are not going to get as fast a response. So what I would be doing — and this is partly why I suggested the licensing arrangement — is trying to individualise education as much as is possible, because the more individualised any kind of intervention is, whether it is in clinical practice or whether it is in broad education, in fact the sort of stuff we do in the livestock industries, the more individualised it is, the better the outcome.

Perhaps just to give you an idea, the outcome from that agricultural research was that we developed these multimedia training programs, but individualised. So a person sits down at a computer; it has got a voice track, so literacy is not an issue; they sit there and they go through this program. At the very beginning of the program they fill a questionnaire, and then later on in the program it gives them individualised feedback on where they stand relative to the rest of the community. You can put in whatever you like. We put in various attitudes that we know are relevant to welfare outcomes for cattle or pigs or whatever. The voice will say to them, 'You scored in the bottom 20 per cent on this particular thing. People who have those sorts of views tend to be at risk of this kind of behaviour' — of mistreating their animal or whatever it happens to be. 'Therefore we would suggest you think very carefully about these sorts of things, and remember that' — and we will give them the relevant piece of facts that is supposed to go with it.

The current version is now online, so that means anybody anywhere in the world can sit down, log into this thing and do the course. It takes about an hour and a half. That would be entirely practical for this sort of thing. So if you were thinking of something to train people prior to their licence, you could say, 'Okay, you've got to log into the Victorian government website. You've got to do this, and when you've finished you'll get a little record that will say you've finished, and you can take that along and get your licence'. That is entirely practical. Being individualised, then you are more likely to get direct individual benefits, which you will not get by publishing in the newspaper or whatever.

Mr EIDEH — I would like to hear your opinion of the greyhound adoption program. Could this be improved, and how?

Prof. COLEMAN — I am probably not sufficiently well informed to give much advice about that actually. Robert?

Dr HOLMES — I have very little association with it. I see the occasional one but — —

Prof. COLEMAN — I have only got anecdotal evidence. I have seen plenty of them out in the community, and so far as I am aware it is working okay, but I am sorry, I do not have any direct information.

Mr EIDEH — And what is your opinion about the muzzling?

Dr HOLMES — Of greyhounds or dogs in general?

Mr EIDEH — Greyhounds.

Prof. COLEMAN — Do you have a view on that? You have an interest.

Dr HOLMES — We are actually talking about two different forms of attack. If we are talking about the basis of the greyhound racing industry, that is a predatory attack. The attacks that we are talking about which result in dog bites to children — or humans — is aggressive attack. The two have quite different drivers. The dog bites occurring to people are usually caused by anxiety or fear — sometimes there is frustration in there as well — and that is one set of circuitry in the brain, an emotional circuit. The other one is the chase, the hunting; that is the predatory behaviour. The greyhound industry is based on chasing the lure. The muzzle is being

considered necessary for the greyhounds during racing, and I know there has been a carryover into the adoption area.

I have no difficulty with dogs being conditioned to wearing muzzles. Again I have no personal experience; this is anecdotal. I gather that in the middle of Vienna you are not allowed to take an unmuzzled dog; full stop, end of story — a cultural difference. I cannot validate that. As far as muzzle training is concerned, there are certain circumstances with dogs other than greyhounds where it is an appropriate intervention. A lot of dogs instantly react against it as a form of confinement — restriction — and they paw it off. If they get it off, you have got a real problem on your hands training it to get it back on again. But with the right knowledge, a bit of patience and the right training you can have a dog accept a muzzle as long as its face has enough to put the muzzle on. There are some breeds — those that look as though they have run into the back of a bus without stopping — that cannot wear a normal muzzle.

But as an issue I see it as an appropriate intervention at times. In fact sometimes it has a benefit in dogs. It appears to have a calming effect on them akin to some other calming effects like wearing compression garments, sometimes known as anxiety wraps or ThunderShirts. There is a whole area there, which is a fascinating area, which needs investigating. Some other time maybe we can talk about that.

The CHAIR — At this point I will thank you both for coming before our committee today and providing testimony and just remind you that you will be provided with transcripts of today's evidence for you to peruse, and eventually those transcripts will find their way onto the committee's website. Again I would just like to take the opportunity to thank you both for coming before us today.

Ms HARTLAND — Very helpful.

The CHAIR — Very helpful indeed. I will suspend our hearing.

Prof. COLEMAN — Thanks for your time.

Dr HOLMES — Thank you very much.

Witnesses withdrew.