



# NATIONAL ANIMAL INTEREST ALLIANCE

*Supporting the people who care for America's animals*

Dr. Gail C. Golab  
Director, Animal Welfare Division  
American Veterinary Medical Association  
1931 North Meacham Rd  
Schaumburg, IL 20173

September 25, 2012

Dear Dr. Golab:

Veterinarians are considered by themselves and the public to be the “animal experts” in the United States. Our clients expect us to provide their requested services while being advocates for their pet’s best medical care and overall interests. These two demands may at times be in direct conflict with each other. What may be in the best interests of the pet may not coincide with the clients needs and vice versa. However, with appropriate surgical techniques to control disease and appropriate medications to manage pain, we can in most cases meet both opposing sets of needs.

Every decision we make is based on the balance of risks versus benefits. These decisions range from what we are going to eat, how we are going to get to work, and medical decisions for us and our animals.

All medical procedures, veterinary and human, have potential negative outcomes. This fear of “potential negative outcomes” is the weak argument the AVMA has stated as rationale for why we should not perform ear cropping, tail docking, and dewclaw removal.

The risk of potential negative outcomes cannot become the pivotal way for decisions to be made. If this were to become the driving decisive force, we would not do ovariohysterectomies or castrations, dental cleanings, or tumor removals. These are important commonly performed medical procedures done safely and with constantly improving pain management in every veterinary clinic in the United States on a daily basis. Most ovariohysterectomies and castrations performed on young dogs and cats are done for the convenience of their owners, to prevent unwanted estrous cycles and sexual behaviors, not for the long-term health of the patient. The only documented exception to this is when ovary removal is performed to minimize the development of mammary tumors in female dogs. However, the risks of anesthetic complications, wound infections, wound dehiscence, hemorrhage, and other surgical complications are well known. In addition, other health risks related to surgical altering pets are being investigated, including urinary incontinence and many forms of malignancy.

Veterinarians and pet owners could become paralyzed by the risks of potential negative outcomes. Rather than paralysis, we need to weigh the risks and benefits and work to maximize the benefits while reducing the risks.

Dog owners, as visual beings, select our dogs based on two characteristics: appearance and behavior. Whether we think about it or not, these two characteristics are closely interrelated. Dogs with upright

ears are usually more attentive and interactive with their environment than dogs with flop ears. Dogs with floppy ears have a more friendly, soft appearance. Appearance suggests attitude and function.

Dewclaws, ear position and tail length involve both appearance and medical concerns. Many working and hunting breeds are safer in the field and pasture without these appendages that are frequently and painfully injured while at work. Preventive removal when the dogs are young pups is a safe, fast procedure that can be done humanely with appropriate, affordable pain management.

AVMA's recommendation to stop providing these procedures will not remove the demand for these services by dictating which procedures their members can be involved with. They will merely move these procedures underground, where non-veterinarians will be making medical decisions, prescribing, anesthetizing patients, and performing surgical procedures without appropriate training, equipment, facilities, and medications. Veterinarians need to be increasingly vigilant that we do not "give away" additional professional services to non-professionals. Too many veterinary medical procedures have been handed off or have slipped away from the profession – services such as dental care, hoof care, and reproductive and surgical procedures once considered to be exclusively in the veterinary domain.

As a practicing veterinarian with 30 years of experience and a breeder of Pembroke Welsh Corgis with surgically docked tails, I support the ongoing practice of taildocking, dewclaw removal, and ear cropping.

Rather than the AVMA making a broad and sweeping statement about how medical care should be delivered based on specific limited surgical procedures, these decisions should be left to individual dog owners and highly trained, compassionate, caring veterinarians to determine which procedures are appropriate for individual animals and how to best deliver these services to allow for maximal benefits and minimal risks.

Sincerely,

**Marthina Greer**

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