

Shock Collars: Barbaric, Ineffective, and Unacceptable

By Steve Dale, CABC

Veterinary technicians potentially have a huge role to play in determining who recommended dog trainers may be. And that is important – maybe ultimately meaning life or death for any dog. There is a price to be paid when trainers use aversive techniques.

Following a five-year campaign in the UK (#banshockcollars), this tool will be banned there, effective February 1, 2024.

Karen Overall, VMD, PhD, DACVB, CAAB has called these devices “barbaric.”¹

Even if dogs absolutely can learn when shock collars (also called e-collars) are used, then what are they learning and is it the right thing to do? And is there potentially physical and likely psychological collateral damage?

There’s no doubt that dogs can be trained to do things or most often not to do things using these devices.

That’s one problem right there – they learn what not to do, but not what TO do.

In the process, they deliver an electric shock to dogs’ necks via a remote-control device, some as far as a mile away. That shock can last for 11 seconds, and be somewhat significant or mild.

Common sense and science have shown:

- Positive reinforcement is a more efficient and successful way to train dogs compared to what behaviorists and dog trainers refer to as positive punishment, giving an undesirable consequence after an unwanted behavior to make it less appealing (which is what shock collars do).
- Dogs may develop an assortment of behavior problems associated with the shock collar, not only might the shock be painful but it's frightening. Dogs have no clue where the sudden shock is coming from. The collateral psychological damage may be significant. However, no known behavior problems are caused by positive reinforcement dog training, even if the trainer is inept.
- If the shock is associated with the handler, this can impact the human animal bond.
- Individuals may use the shock collar inappropriately. For example, I witnessed a professional trainer meaning to shock the dog for running the other way – but simultaneously, a garbage truck came by. Instead of the intended result, it became clear that dog became instantly terrified of the garbage truck because the shock was accompanying the truck.
- From a welfare perspective, shocking our best friends is, at best, unkind.

Of course, veterinary professionals seek out science. So, at the bottom of this story is a very small sampling of the many published papers confirming the five bullet points noted above.

The UK isn't the first to ban these collars; they are banned in France (just this year), New Zealand, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Wales as well as throughout most of Australia and in Quebec Canada and Boulder, CO. In 2020, Petco announced they are no longer selling devices which emit a shock. In Scotland, there are ongoing efforts to also ban shock collars.

In her book *Manuel of Clinical Behavioral Medicine for Dogs and Cats*, Dr. Overall says, "Shock should not be used to train dogs or as a treatment for behavioral concerns²."

Marc Bekoff, PhD , former Professor of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at the University of Colorado, Boulder, and is a Fellow of the Animal Behaviour Society and a past Guggenheim Fellow. Dr. Bekoff has co-authored stories and books with Dr. Jane Goodall and in a radio interview told me, “It’s a shame shock collars were developed in the first place. I shudder when I think of how some still use them³.”

One argument is that the shock is often mild, however not quite so mild when people try it on themselves.

The argument then shifts to: Dogs don’t feel the pain as we do.

While decades ago that argument might have been acceptable, it’s sure not today as we do have an understanding of canine neurochemistry and neurology. We now *know* dogs feel the shock exactly the same as we do and studies have demonstrated that dogs sometimes pay a physical price later in life, aside from the psychological impact of being shocked⁴.

What’s most shocking is that some so-called professional trainers continue using this equipment – even after all these years – and offering all sorts of rationalizations, such as “this is the only way to train fast.” If even that is true, is it worth the significant consequences?

Veterinary clinics should proactively recommend dog trainers, and know specifically who those trainers are and how they train. We know positive reinforcement training keeps dogs in homes.

Too many clinics simply support trainers who market themselves as being positive reinforcement trainers, and drop off their business cards rather than actually sending a technician to audit a class, to watch the techniques used.

Puppy classes can actually be taught in-clinic by licensed, certified or registered technicians. This way you clearly **KNOW** the methods being implemented, and assuming puppies have a good time, they (and their people) all are bonded positively to the clinic. And it’s a way to earn a bit of extra cash.

¹Steve Dale's *PetWorld* blog post personal conversation with Karen Overall, VMD, PhD, DACVB, CAAB, March 29, 2016, <https://stevedalepetworld.com/blog/dont-shock-dog/> (<https://stevedalepetworld.com/blog/dont-shock-dog/>)

²Karen Overall, VMD, PhD, DACVB, CAAB, *Manuel of Clinical Behavioral Medicine for Dogs and Cats* (Elsevier, 2013), p. 746-748.

³Steve Dale's *PetWorld* blog post personal conversation with Marc Bekoff, PhD, April 18, 2019, <https://stevedalepetworld.com/blog/theres-no-need-to-be-the-alpha-dog/> (<https://stevedalepetworld.com/blog/theres-no-need-to-be-the-alpha-dog/>).

⁴AVSAB (American Veterinary Society Animal Behavior) Position Statement: Humane Dog Training, 2021 <https://avsab.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/AVSAB-Humane-Dog-Training-Position-Statement-2021.pdf> (<https://avsab.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/AVSAB-Humane-Dog-Training-Position-Statement-2021.pdf>)

Additional References Regarding E-Collar or Shock Collar Usage:

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