EUTHANASIA

the hardest choice

by Kaye Hargreaves

Originally published as Topic Seven in a series of booklets covering the most common behaviour problems in dogs, written by Kaye Hargreaves, one of Australia's foremost behavioural dog trainers and authors.

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Euthanasia means the humane killing of an animal. Pet dogs are often euthanized to avoid prolonged suffering as they approach the end of their life, or if they have a serious illness or injury. However, many dogs are euthanised because they are unwanted.

R.W. Murray estimates that more than 10% of an Australian city's dog population is euthanized or "put down" as unwanted every year.
Many dogs are neglected, abandoned, rehomed or put down because of behaviour problems. Behaviour problems directly and indirectly cause the death by euthanasia of many dogs each year. Many shelters now have some sort of adoption test. If the dog fails the shelter adoption test or runs out of time, euthanasia is the result.

In the US, the Regional Shelter Relinquishment Study found that aggression towards people or animals was the most common reason for relinquishment of dogs to shelters.

It is widely alleged that in the US the most common reason for euthanasia of pet dogs is behaviour problems.

Death from behavior problems is the leading cause of pet mortality according to Dr Nicholas Dodman, Director of the Animal Behavior Clinic at Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine.

Increasing numbers of vets and breeders are advising their puppy owners of the importance of socialisation and early training to avoid behaviour problems. The most serious problem is aggression towards people.

If a dog does bite someone, there are five options[1]:

1. do nothing
2. manage the risk
3. train, which includes behaviour modification
4. re-home, or
5. euthanize

[1] Since this was written, the use of medication has become more widespread. This could be regarded as a sixth option, although I prefer to see it as an adjunct to a package of management and behaviour modification.

Serious bites, showing a lack of bite inhibition, require either total management of the dog or euthanasia. They are a severe risk. Incidents in which the dog shows good bite inhibition are much more workable. Dr Ian Dunbar has produced a well-known list which categorises level of bite by objectively measurable degrees of seriousness.[2]

Biting rarely, if ever, comes out of the blue.

Most dogs give warning signs, which owners should learn to recognise. However, it takes skill and experience to make an assessment of these factors. This booklet looks at the issues related to the decision of whether or not euthanasia is appropriate for a dog with behaviour problems. Philosophically, [think euthanasia is acceptable, and preferable to rehoming if this means passing the problem on to some unfortunate person. Definitely better than living with a high risk dog that is unsuited to the owner's needs, circumstances, skills, available time etc. It is not just the trainability of the dog, but the chance for this particular combination of dog and people to work.

The hard choices - is the problem workable?

Basically, there are only five options when you are faced with a serious behaviour problem. These need to be considered in detail, in the light of the dog's behaviour and the owner's circumstances before a final decision is made.

1. Do nothing

In most cases, if you do nothing the problem will get worse. Then it is only a matter time before something very serious happens. The dog bites someone, the damage done by biting or dog fighting gets worse, the level of nuisance barking escalates until someone retaliates, the destructiveness and unruliness of the dog gets worse, the dog escapes or chases once too often and gets run over or causes an accident ... and so on.

It is rarely true that dogs grow out of behaviour problems. Usually they "grow into" them. Perhaps they grow out of normal puppy behaviour which might be problematic for the owner, but "heavy duty" problems involving aggression usually get worse.

2. management of the risks

Management is needed for all dogs. There is no such thing as a dog guaranteed to be risk free. That is why we have fences and leashes.

[2] Dr Ian Dunbar, Levels of bite http://apdt.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/ian-dunbar-dog-bite-scale.pdf

However, for a dog with behaviour problems, a back up system of careful management is essential, especially if the problem involves aggression. There is no room for a mistake, as one slip up, one door accidentally left open, one person coming in the house unannounced can mean disaster. An aggressive dog is a liability for the owner and getting sued is a real possibility should the dog bite someone, regardless of the circumstances. The provisions for dogs declared dangerous in the state of Victoria in Australia are onerous. The dog must be muzzled and on leash when off the owner's property and kept in a "bomb-proof" enclosure at other times. The quality of life for the dog under those conditions is questionable.

Not all dogs need such an extreme form of management, but if you opt for management of your dog as an alternative to euthanasia, you need to be very aware of the precise nature of the risk, trigger factors, what to avoid and what is relatively safe. These management strategies are as important as a training program, and often the two have to be undertaken together.

3. Undertake a training and behaviour program

If a training and behaviour modification program is followed, you can expect some improvement, and will need to monitor how much management and residual risk remains.

Before deciding to euthanise a dog because of behaviour problems, one should consider all the training and behaviour modification options available - and there are many of these. Karen Pryor's classic book ***Don't Shoot The Dog*** covers a range of behavioural alternatives to either literally or metaphorically shooting the dog.

Booklet No.11 in this series discusses in detail how to change behaviour. In addition to generic behaviour modification strategies, there are specific methods tailored to specific problems.

Does this mean that one should never "shoot the dog"? Sadly, I believe that the answer is no, for various reasons. These include the availability of someone familiar with all the behaviour modification training techniques, the willingness and ability of the owner, given their individual circumstances, to embark on such a program, and the likelihood of the dog responding.

The goals of a behaviour modification and training program for aggressive dogs:

- for the client to have more confidence in their management and handling of the dog
- to recognise preliminary signs of aggression and divert the dog

- to avoid trigger situations
- to be able to read the dog's body language
- to be able to use physical management when necessary e.g. to put the dog on lead when people arrive, to muzzle the dog when walking through a crowd
- to work in training and behaviour modification, so that the dog's threshold for aggression is raised
- to know where that threshold is

Dog training (and working with behavior problems in particular) is a people industry" not a "dog Industry". Owners whose dogs have aggression problems or other problems that lead consider euthanasia as an option are always full of conflicting feelings - guilt, anger, defensiveness, ambivalence and so on. Having an animal euthanized because of a behavior problem is one of the most upsetting experiences for an owner.

I usually do an initial consultation, then present the owner with options and a suggested training program, if I think that is appropriate, then it is up to the owner to consider what they want to do.

I follow Bill Campbell's advice, that it is pointless working with a client who is not committed to the process. If they give you or the dog an ultimatum - shape up or else - then it is unlikely that the training program will work. Ultimately, it is the input of the owner that makes the difference, not the dog, not the instructor. The instructor gives valuable resources to the owner in the form of moral support and information to interpret and understand the dog's behavior and guidance to work through the problem. But what really counts is how the owner handles the dog in every day life.

If there are conflicts within the family, then these really have to be dealt with. I had a call from a woman who was "at her wit's end". I think I could have helped her and worked on the dog's behavior, but basically her husband wanted to get rid of the dog. She was attached to the dog, and very distressed. I suggested her husband come to the first consultation and I could explain the process to him. She laughed hysterically, and said there was "no way" he would even consider being there. All I could do was suggest that until the family resolved its differences, there was little point in involving me. Because of the nature of the problem, it was clear that stress in the home environment was a large part of the dog's problem behavior.

Perhaps if this is not going to be resolved, and the poor dog will continue to be over-loved and over-punished, euthanasia may be the more humane option. It's a hard one, but sometimes it can be true. The old joke about "how many psychologists does it take to change a light globe" applies

here. The light globe has to want to change.

People feel ambivalent; you rarely get a full picture initially. People can be in denial. They can omit details or understate the severity of the problem, because they are so afraid that the trainer will say the dog has to be put down. Sometimes they don't know enough to be able to identify what is relevant in the dog's history.

People need to be committed in order for the training to work.
If you are a trainer, never feel embarrassed about stating your limits. If you don't want to work with a dog, or you feel you are unable to help, that's all right. Perhaps someone else can. Make an effort to refer the dog and owner on to someone else. Group classes or even individual lessons offering basic obedience are not the place for dealing with behaviour problems.

4. Re-home the dog

This can sometimes be successful, especially where the problem is more a matter of a mismatch between the dog and owner, rather than an entrenched behaviour problem in the dog.

I frequently see "mismatches" between dog and owner. There is nothing wrong with either party, but they don't suit each other. This may be due their energy and activity levels, the amount of time and attention they want from each other or are prepared to give, the environment they live in and the environments they go out into, and how comfortable they are in those particular environments.

On the other hand, if your dog is hard to live with, and you are considering the hard options, ask yourself whether anyone else would cope any better. They would probably run out of commitment or patience sooner, because they would be less attached to the dog than you. They would have to be special people not to get impatient and resort to punishment or neglect of the dog if they were unable to solve the problem, and there is always a likelihood of the dog being passed on. And with each unsuccessful home, the dog's chances diminish. This is the sad reality that an owner has to confront before taking the rehoming option.
Many people have said to me that they would feel responsible if something went wrong - they would be just passing the problem on to someone else. Rather than allowing this to happen, they may have to consider the fifth option.

If you cannot find an appropriate home, then euthanasia might be more humane than surrendering the dog to a shelter, which is very stressful and

no guarantee that the dog will find a new home. The pressure to re-home or adopt rather than euthanise may in some cases contribute to "revolving door Syndrome" which ultimately is not in the interests of the dog.

5. Euthanise the dog

Euthanasia should be considered as one of the options and seriously chosen or rejected rather than denied and avoided before the owners can commit themselves to other options.

When doing behaviour problem consultations, I do not recommend euthanasia. because I feel it is the owner's decision. But I do discuss the range of options - training, management, re-homing (which in most cases, given the circumstances, I advise against) and euthanasia, so that the dog's owner can come to an informed choice (after looking at the full spectrum) which they are comfortable with. As far as possible I discuss the chances of success or partial success, and the need to weigh the risks to owners, myself and others during the training period as well as the residual risk after training. After the first consultation, I give the owner an assessment on these factors, and suggest (if appropriate) a training program with a limited time frame and built in evaluation of progress. They can then choose whether or not to go ahead.

My role is to assess the training options and support the client in reaching their decision.

If they decide on euthanasia, I generally suggest that they don't carry it out immediately - I suggest they take a week to think about it, and be sure about their choice.

A family conference will help them to go through the grieving process. However, be aware that children may have unrealistic expectations about the possibility of overcoming problems.

It is important for all concerned in the decision, trainers, veterinary clinic staff, breeders and so on to give the dog owner moral support in their decision. People often experience feelings of guilt and failure, as well as embarrassment about their grief.

When to decide to euthanise.

There is no hard and fast rule, each dog is an individual and each owner must reach a decision after taking into account all the aspects of their situation. However, these are some points to consider:

- you have tried changing the dog's the environment and behaviour modification, and have not been able to bring about an acceptable

change in the dog;

What is acceptable will vary from person to person.

- embarking upon a behaviour modification and training problem would leave too great a risk of the dog doing damage - for example biting someone during the training process.

The risk might be to family members, the trainer or the public.I have dealt with clients whose dog presented an unacceptable risk to me.
I have also dealt with dogs who presented a risk to members of the owner's family, especially children, and with dogs who presented an unacceptable risk to the general public. Where this is the case, I believe the responsible thing to do is canvas the option of euthanasia.

This places some responsibility on the trainer to be able to tell the difference between, for example, aggressive behaviour that is primarily bluster, and relatively low risk, and aggression that has real intent to do damage. If there was a litmus test for this, we would all be a lot better off. The best test is what the dog has done already. If the dog has had aggressive incidents but not done damage, the prognosis is better than if the dog has done damage. However, in many cases the owner has been able to restrain the dog, and will say that the dog has never been given the opportunity to do damage, but it would if given the opportunity. This is not always the case. Some dogs will make an awful lot of noise and look very threatening, but have no serious intent to back up their threats. In fact, it has often been suggested that dogs who intend doing damage especially in dog fights, will do it swiftly and silently. Aggressive displays serve the purpose of avoiding the need for damage. A display such as the agonist Inc pucker is regarded as a distance-increasing behaviour, the function of which is to avoid the need for actual aggression. This does make it hard to assess the likelihood of damage.

I don't discount the validity of intuition here either. The dog that gives me a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach, makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up or gives me nightmares for the rest of the week is probably too dangerous to work with. I would prefer more scientific criteria, but I suspect that these reactions are based on my general observations. As an experienced trainer, I can identify some dogs whose body language and demeanour have told me that the dog meant business. If this is combined with the fact that the dog is large enough to do serious damage, or that children are at risk, I have sometimes informed the owners that training and attempted behaviour modification is too dangerous.

For example, I assessed an American Pitbull Terrier, male, about 2 years old. The owner was.a building tradesman, about 30, married with kids aged

about 18 months and 4 years old. He contacted me at the suggestion of the veterinary clinic, where I think the dog had bitten or tried to bite the nurse. I saw the family at home. I got more of a history, and there had been at least six instances of biting since he was a puppy. Each incident had its own explanation (or excuse?). But clearly each 'incident was getting worse and as I said to the owner "he has told you six times that he is willing to be aggressive, and the aggression is getting worse. It is only a matter of time before he does serious damage." The dog was very tense, showing an odd wary, stand-offish, submissive, anxious attitude towards me. I attracted him to me by being very low-key and giving him pieces of meat. After a while I was able to handle him physically, and when relaxed, he seemed quite good-natured. He displayed the same contradictory tension about being handled by his owner. The owner's wife said it was amazing, he had never approached a visitor and allowed himself to be handled before. He was "predictably unpredictable" in several different situations. He used to be taken to work by the owner, but after incidents in which he had bitten other workers on the building site, he had to left at home. He was kept outside the house by the wife who "would never be cruel to him" but feared and disliked him. The husband was self-employed and worked long hours, often seven days a week.

I went through the options of management and intensive training, weighed against the considerable risk I saw in the dog, especially as the youngest child became more mobile. Clearly the husband loved the dog but saw that he could not put the time in, and that management would still leave too many risks. This tough Aussie bloke was in tears, saying his family had been giving him a hard time for thinking about euthanasia, and the vet would think he was a monster. I said "the vet won't think you're a monster, he'll think you're very responsible and you must have a lot of guts to make such a tough decision." I suggested he take a few days to think about it, so that he could be sure of his decision. and that I would phone the vet clinic and tell them of my assessment, so they would be expecting a call from him. The vet nurse rang me back to say that they had hoped that this would be the outcome of the consultation and that the dog had in fact been euthanised.

I think the case illustrates a situation in which the dog's previous history of biting was an adequate predictor that it would happen again. The most likely victims would be the children, or visiting children. I have never forgotten the little girl coming home from dancing lessons, prancing around in a tutu saying “Daddy, look at me!” Then thinking about what damage the dog could do to her face. Let alone the toddler, who was standing at his father’s knee, jostling for space with the dog.

The likelihood of either training or management was slight, given the working hours of the husband and the attitude of the wife. In this situation, the best I could do was give the man the support he needed to come to terms with his decision.

- you feel you have made a reasonable effort to deal with the problem

Many owners express the desire to "give the dog a chance"

Cocker Spaniel, M, 18 months - this was the dog's second home. Apparently the first owners had been less than honest about the dog's problems. The vet they went to for a check-up immediately advised that the dog was dangerous, and gave them my name for an assessment. The new owners were a family with two sons about 8 and 11 years. The boys were fantastic handlers. I also thought the dog was a risk, but the owner wanted to "give him a chance". I agreed but with provisos. The boys were able to sit and down the dog using food, and teach him not to jump up. They had fantastic success with squeaky toys, and really understood the leadership message: "haha this is mine, you have to do what I say or you're not gettin' it! Sit." But it never became confrontational, because they were enjoying the game too. We also worked on having the dog sitting quietly to have his lead put on. We put a chair by the gate, and they just sat and ignored him if he carried on, until he allowed the lead to go on without drama. We worked on approaching the gate and going back again if he barged, and eventually when he was able to get through the gate calmly, we did a little work on walking on a loose lead. The husband was a sour, hostile man who didn't want the dog, and insisted that he be kept outside This didn't help. The dog was over-excited when they went out to him, but they were working on that. However, he became seriously aggressive when they tried to go inside.

On the third lesson (these were home visits) we discussed the prospects of continuing. I said "I don't think he's the dog for you; you've given him a chance and he has improved, and you could spend a lot of time and money and he would improve further, but I couldn't guarantee he would be trustworthy even then. Also, the boys have been great. The longer you keep the.dog, the more attached they will become, and if you decide to give up the dog in a month or two, it will be that much harder for them. And quite frankly, from what you've told me, I don't think that's what you want. She said "no, it's not:" I suggested she go back to the vet and discuss my evaluation. The vet then advised euthanasia, and that's what happened. The vet also found a very sweet abandoned Cavalier King Charles 'Spaniel for them, and that worked out well.

- the behaviour problem is so serious that it is not really an option to find the dog a new home

There are cases in which the problem is primarily one of a mismatch, and in such cases rehoming is an option. However, when the problem is a high risk of aggression, most owners feel that it is not acceptable to pass on the risk to someone else. Generally, a new owner cannot be expected to be any more committed to the dog than the current owner. People with experience who are willing to deliberately take on a dog with behaviour problems are rare - and usually have more than enough dogs already. [believe dog owners should be discouraged from trying to find fantasy solutions such as a new home with "more space" when the dog is actually aggressive .

- for some reason the current owner is not capable of dealing with the dog

Few people get advice about selecting the right dog for their situation, and some end up with disastrously unsuitable dogs. Two examples come to mind from my client histories.

One involved an elderly couple who were bringing up their grandson, who was fourteen. They acquired a very unstable German Shepherd cross from a market. By five months of age he was already very strong and showing serious lunging and barking at people in the house and in the street. We worked on basic obedience, leadership and desensitization for three months. When it came time for the clients to pay for another block of lessons, I suggested we talk about whether that was what they really wanted. Although we had made progress with the dog, I thought he was still dangerous and his owners would never be in total control of him. And he still had a year or two to go before he reached maturity. My raising the option of euthanasia at this point gave the owners permission to consider it, and that is what they decided to do. I still remembers the grandfather, with tears in his eyes, saying "thank you, thank you" and only confiding in me at that point that he had been afraid of the dog. I accompanied the boy to the vet clinic and sat with him as his dog was put to sleep.

The other case involved an elderly woman who adopted a puppy from a litter that was born on a building site. The puppy was in effect feral, and lacking in socialisation. She had been able to adapt to her owner, but was seriously threatening aggression with strangers. She was a large and strong dog, with the appearance of possibly a collie/cattle dog cross. Her only contact with other people was one visit to the vet for vaccinations. At that time she reacted with extreme fear and aggression. I saw them when the dog was aged seven months. Already, she was too strong for the woman to walk her. The only form of management was that the woman would put the dog on a chain outside if a visitor called. The house was old and dilapidated, and I feared that when the dog lunged she would pull the rickety verandah post down.

My opinion was that given the dog's background, and the owner's limited capacity, it was highly unlikely that the dog would ever become socially acceptable. As the owner refused to consider having the dog put down, we worked on her, doing some basic training, behaviour modification and working with their vet who supplied medication. The outcome of this was unsatisfactory, due in part to the owner's lack of physical co-ordination and agility, and the extremely small house and cramped space, which made it hard for me to work at a distance from the dog. The only remaining options were to advise the client to chain and muzzle the dog before letting anyone into the house.

- If a combination of management, behaviour modification and medication won't make the dog acceptable

If this is the case, euthanasia is probably the best option. This I believe was the case in the example described above.

- if the owners are afraid of the dog

I am amazed at how much people will tolerate from their dogs, including being bitten and threatened. Sometimes they can be helped by being taken through non-confrontational leadership and practical control exercises, and given advice on how to deal with problematic behaviour without provoking aggression in the dog. However, if they are unwilling to do this or problems persist despite their efforts, euthanasia may be appropriate.

If the owner is afraid of the dog, this suggests that the dog is directing its aggression towards the owner. This type of aggression is what used to be identified as "dominance aggression", although targeting family members need not necessarily indicate dominance. It may be the dog's response to being punished, for example. However, I have seen examples of large, confident, assertive dogs, with owners who have failed to establish humane and sensible boundaries, and the dog takes control of interactions.

For behavioural change to be successful in cases of this kind of "dominance Aggression", the whole family needs to be involved. Inconsistent treatment, especially unpredictable "spoiling" alternating with punishment can make the dog erratic and inclined to take control through aggression.

In one case, a client was referred to me by the breeder of the dog, a nine month old German Shepherd. The dog had a very strong temperament, would have been hard to handle at the best of times, and was harassing the owner, a soft-hearted middle aged woman. The dog jumped up at her, mouthed her wrists, caused numerous bruises. and had been known to bite the woman in the back as she tried to walk away from the dog. I was surprised because this particular breeder had a very good track record of

matching the temperament of his puppies to their new owners. When I spoke to him it turned out that the breeder had in fact sold the dog to the woman's 22 year old son, a tall, strongly built man who enjoyed playing rough and tumble physical games with the dog. I suggested to the woman that this should stop, but she was very unassertive and thought that her son would not comply. In addition, her husband was a big, bossy man who was able to intimidate the dog. Neither son nor husband were willing to change their behaviour, despite the fact that it was leading to the woman, who was at home during the day, being harassed and bitten.

Under the circumstances, I gave the woman as many resources to deal with her dog as I could, despite the lack of co-operation from her family. We made a lot of progress. However, this dog was euthanised as a result of a physical health condition.

- if the behaviour is unpredictable or uncontrollable

I had a client with a 3 year old Staffordshire Bull Terrier who had suddenly attacked with no apparent provocation. Extensive investigation of the dog's history, previous behaviour, level of training, temperament assessment and everything else I could think of left me baffled. Usually when a client says "the dog attacked out of the blue, for no reason" this alerts me to the likelihood that the dog has been giving warning signs for the last three years which have been misunderstood or not noticed. But not in this case. The dog was calm, well behaved and relaxed with both people and other dogs. It just didn't add up. So I raised the possibility of seizure-related aggression with the client and spoke to the (vet. qualified) behaviour consultant who had referred the client to me. I suggested that since I couldn't find any behavioural causes of the incident that maybe something neurological was going on. He saw the client again and decided that the most likely explanation was a sub-epileptic spectrum disorder. The client decided on euthanasia, because although the family loved the dog, and I thought that apart from this incident, he was a great dog, they could not cope with the stress or the risk of waiting for it happen again, and not knowing whether medication would make any difference. I had advised the client and the vet. that while training would do no harm, it wouldn't solve the problem.

So, sadly, but I think, wisely, the dog was euthanised.

Karen Overall, one of the most highly respected U.S. veterinary behaviourists has commented that a client's willingness to treat a dominantly aggressive dog depends on the likelihood of injury and on whether the client can predict when the dog will be aggressive. If an owner thinks that his or her dog's aggression is unpredictable, euthanasia is a frequent outcome.

She advises that whoever is working with the client should take a detailed history and try to identify triggers to the dog's aggression - for example, the dog bites if you stare at it, or it someone tries to hug it. These situations should be avoided while a behaviour modification program is being undertaken. Often the role of the behavioural trainer is to make the dog owners more aware of these trigger situations and the dog's telltale body language. Predictability makes to dog more manageable.

- if the dog has an extreme temperament problem

Siberian Husky, M, 15 weeks old when he first came to Puppy Class. He had been referred to training by the vet, who had been bitten during a recent consultation. The pup had already learnt to dominate at home, to the point where his rather unassertive female owner was scared of him. Her husband was inclined to disbelieve because he “didn't have a problem with the dog". From the first week in Puppy Class, I thought "here's trouble". Another instructor took the class, and they worked on lure-reward sit and down type of exercises. In the second week, we were milling around socialising at the start of the class. The pup approached me and I patted him and put my hands on his withers, shoulders, neck area. He instantly went crazy, biting really hard and screaming his head off. I know they're only puppy teeth, but this was a full-force bite, with no bite inhibition whatsoever. My usual policy when I get a panic/tantrum/biting fit from a puppy is to hold them calmly until they stop. This was the first pup who seriously tempted me to withdraw my hand. My reasoning is that (a) [don't want the pup to]earn that this behaviour will succeed in making people back off, and (b) to show them that normal calm handling need not be a threat.

I said I was very concerned. I gathered a lot of detail about the pup's dominance and aggression at home. I said I was willing to work with the dog, but I thought he had a serious problem, and there was less chance of turning him around as he was leaving the puppy stage. I also commented that I thought he was not the dog for her. She was a "softy" and said they had researched breeds for a long time, and got a husky because the breeder said they were "never aggressive". I suggested that she consult again with her vet. Apparently there was an incident that her husband witnessed a few days later. The vet advised that the dog was not suitable for the purpose they had bought him, and the breeder was obliged to take him back. The breeder refused to hear the point that his aggression was towards people, and kept saying things like "I'll run him with the other dogs" and "I'll sort him out". I said I didn't like the sound of that. The client sent the dog to the breeder, mainly because she couldn't bring herself to have him put down. They never got him back. I believe euthanasia would have been a better choice.

Other options ...

Myths and fantasies

Needs a lot of space ... needs a big back yard ... would be better off living on a farm ... etc. These are rarely options. They are probably expressions of denial. Farmers do not welcome non-functional dogs. Big back yards do not solve the problems of dogs who are bored and understimulated. Who can work with the person and their dog?

When we assess a dog's prognosis, in practice we are not just assessing the dog. We are assessing the dog in the context of realistic options. In a shelter situation, how adoptable is the dog? What is the likelihood of finding a suitable owner? If we are discussing training and behaviour modification with the dog's current owner, the realistic options are limited by how treatable the behaviour is, but also what sort of commitment in terms of time, effort, money and emotional input the owner is able to give. The owner should also face the issue of continued management of a behaviour problem if training results in a partial improvement and residual risk.

Experienced behavioural trainers may be able to improve the odds greatly but this assumes such a person is available and affordable.

Usually, in cases where the owner is considering euthanasia because of a behavioural problem, simple obedience training in a standard group class or dog club environment is unlikely to help. What is needed is one on one attention from a behavioural trainer who is experienced in dealing with behaviour problems, and able to give the owner long term follow-up and help with going through behaviour modification programs step by step. We are seeing more people emerging in Australia who can do this, but they are still rare.

Nevertheless, I would urge veterinary clinics and dog clubs who come across such situations to try to refer the owner of a difficult dog to someone who specialises in behaviour problems before resorting to euthanasia on the grounds that the dog is "untrainable".

All too often, we get people at the stage of saying "if all else fails as a last resort, try training." I'd like to have them a bit earlier.

Kaye Hargreaves