

# The Barbaric Procedure Your Dog Should Never Have to Endure

Some dog owners remain steadfast about the 'need' to perform this procedure. But it is a cruel and inhumane procedure that leads to lifetime afflictions - chronic gagging, compromised airway access, and more. And it destroys your dog's ability to 'talk' to you.

**Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker**

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- The New York State Assembly recently approved legislation that would outlaw “convenience” devocalization (“debarking”) procedures on dogs and cats. The bill would make such procedures a class B misdemeanor, and impose jail time or fines on violators
- Only three other US states, Massachusetts, Maryland, and New Jersey, have passed similar laws
- Devocalization is a surgery that involves cutting or removing an animal’s vocal cords. It is done primarily on dogs, and can cause irreversible health problems, including chronic coughing, gagging, and breathing difficulties
- Excessive vocalization can be effectively managed by addressing the root cause and making appropriate environmental and lifestyle changes

***Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published July 02, 2015.***

In March of this year, the New York State Assembly approved a bill (A1679) that would ban devocalization procedures on dogs and cats performed for reasons of convenience rather than medical necessity. The legislation would also require veterinarians to document all such procedures and provide the number performed to the Commissioner of Education.<sup>1</sup>

Assemblyman Kenneth Zebrowski of New City in Rockland County, NY, who sponsored the bill, made his feelings about devocalization known:

*"This is a cruel and inhumane procedure that is being utilized to silence an animal's voice and we must put an end to it. Most devocalization surgeries provide no medical benefit and are done solely for the convenience of the owner."*<sup>2</sup>

He went on to say that devocalization can lead to long-term respiratory and throat disorders. It also silences communication between pet and owner, and the pet and other animals.

## Legislation Would Make Devocalization a Class B Misdemeanor

If the law is passed, it will make convenience devocalizations a class B misdemeanor, and violators could be looking at 90 days in jail or fines of up to \$500. In addition, veterinarians who perform the procedure for any reason other than medical necessity to treat or relieve an animal with a physical injury or illness, could have their license revoked or

removed. Another New York State Assemblyman, Dr. Steve Katz, a veterinarian, supports the bill:

*"I never allowed this procedure to take place and would never allow it today," says Katz. "It's a brutal elective procedure for an issue that could be curtailed by behavioral modification."*<sup>3</sup>

Assembly Bill A1679 was delivered to the NY state Senate on March 24, 2015, and was referred to the Senate Agriculture Committee the same day.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, it may die there just as similar legislation did back in 2010.<sup>5</sup>

## **Other US States With Devocalization Laws**

According to the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), as of this writing, there are just five states that have enacted legislation to prohibit devocalization of dogs under certain circumstances.<sup>6</sup>

- Massachusetts, Maryland, and New Jersey have banned the practice except in cases where it is medically necessary as determined by a veterinarian.
- Ohio has outlawed the devocalization of dogs that have been deemed dangerous.
- Pennsylvania prohibits devocalization of any dog for any reason unless the procedure is performed by a licensed veterinarian using anesthesia. (Since these surgeries are most often performed by vets while the animal is anesthetized, in my book, this doesn't amount to a law "prohibiting" devocalization.)

Two states, California and Rhode Island, have made it illegal to require devocalization or declawing as a condition of real estate occupancy.

## **Devocalization Defined**

Devocalization, also known as debarking, involves either cutting or removing an animal's vocal cords. The most common victims are dogs, but cats are occasionally "de-meowed" as well.

Fortunately, these days many veterinarians refuse to perform the surgery if it is purely for the convenience of the pet owner, breeder or other caregiver. Devocalization provides no benefit to the animal, can create health problems, and is widely considered inhumane. In fact, devocalization is no longer taught in many veterinary schools.

Those still in favor of the procedure claim it can mean the difference between a vocal dog or cat staying with his family or being surrendered to a shelter. However, there is no evidence to support the theory that pets are given up by their owners for being "too vocal."

## **What Actually Happens During a Devocalization**

The procedure is performed either by cutting into the neck and then the larynx, which severs vocal cord tissue, or by going through the mouth to achieve the same result. The second method is less invasive but has a higher risk of scarring that can cause lifelong problems for the animal.

Not only does the procedure expose a pet to the usual risks of surgery like infection, blood loss, and problems with anesthesia, it can also result in scarring of vocal cord tissue regrowth, a condition known as webbing. As with any surgery, there is post-operative pain involved.

Frequently, additional surgery is necessary because after recovery the animal is still able to vocalize, or for correction of unintended consequences from prior procedures. Long-term, often permanent physical consequences for the pet include:

- Chronic coughing and gagging
- Difficulty breathing
- Compromised airway access
- Exercise intolerance
- Elevated stress level
- Increased risk to physical safety due to inability to alert or warn through barking

There can also be psychological and behavioral consequences from a decreased ability to communicate naturally.

The altered voices of devocalized pets have been variously described as lower, harsher, muffled, raspy, wheezy, screechy and high-pitched.

## **Why Pets Vocalize**

Excessive vocalization can have any number of causes. Some breeds of dogs are more prone to vocalize than others, for example, Beagles.

Certain physiological conditions can trigger excessive vocalization, including endocrine disorders and aging. Also, pets that have not been spayed or neutered tend to be more vocal. A holistic veterinarian can be a great resource in helping you resolve underlying issues that might be contributing to your talkative pet. Other factors that can cause dogs to bark excessively include:

- Neighborhood noises such as a loud vehicle, or sudden explosive sounds like a car backfiring can trigger an episode
- Boredom and being tied up or confined can cause vocalization
- Playtime with your dog can cause him to bark
- Changes in the household, like a new pet or human family member can cause stress barking
- Phobias and separation anxiety are also triggers, as are fear and aggression

## **Tips for Shushing a Chatty Companion**

If loud noises set your dog off, a crate of his own that he can go in and out of at will, coupled with soothing music or a television on in the background can help.

If he's barking out of boredom, increase his exercise and playtime, take him on walks, to the dog park, or find other activities that give him both the physical activity and mental stimulation all dogs require to be balanced individuals.

Changes in your pet's routine and environment can cause stress. Consider talking with an **animal behavior specialist** about desensitization and counter conditioning exercises for a stressed out pet. Retraining your dog in basic obedience can also be helpful.

An otherwise healthy cat that is excessively vocal has usually been conditioned to be. Your cat will meow initially because she wants something from you. When she gets it – whether it's food, petting, or a nap on your lap – she quickly realizes meowing gets her needs met.

In addition, some people owned by cats enjoy chatting with them. Many cats will fall into a pattern in which they seem to be responding to the remarks their human makes. If you're conversing with your cat on a regular basis, you're encouraging her to be vocal. If you at some point decide she's a little too chatty, you'll have to condition her to respond to "Shush!" or "Be Quiet!" or some other verbal command when you want her to zip it.

Cats especially tend to get more vocal as they age. If your kitty is older and in good health, but has begun to loudly meow for no apparent reason, the best thing you can do is reassure her in a gentle voice. That's usually enough to calm and quiet an older, vocalizing cat.

## Sources and References

[Democrat & Chronicle March 28, 2015](#)

<sup>1</sup> [Assembly Bill 1679](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Assemblyman Kenneth Zebrowski, Assembly District 96](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Democrat & Chronicle, March 28, 2015](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Open States](#)

<sup>5</sup> [International Society for Animal Rights](#)

<sup>6</sup> [AVMA](#)

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