

EXPERT PERSPECTIVES ON DEVOCALIZATION

Many veterinarians, animal behaviorists and other experts oppose devocalization, in which the vocal cords of a dog or cat are cut to suppress or remove the voice. The quality of the post-surgical voice is unpredictable. It can sound hoarse like laryngitis, wheezy like emphysema, or shrill. There are significant surgical risks and potential long-term complications **regardless of the veterinarian's skill and whether vocal cords are cut through the oral cavity or an incision in the neck.** Some animals die. Others struggle to breathe, cough and gag persistently or are prone to aspiration pneumonia and heat stroke. Tissue regrowth is common. Correcting it and other complications may lead to repeated procedures, subjecting animals to *more* stress and pain, and owners to costs they may be unable or unwilling to absorb. That puts the animal at additional risk: surrender to an animal shelter or convenience euthanasia.

Dogs bark and cats meow. There is always a reason (for persistent vocalization) that should be understood and addressed. Surgery is not the answer and furthermore, it is inhumane. Whether vocal cord tissue is removed totally or partially (snipped, punched or notched), through an incision in the neck or via the oral cavity, surgery anywhere around the larynx subjects the patient to serious risks and pain. Many times, devocalized animals have to be re-operated on as a result of tissue regrowth, re-exposing them to the same risks and pain. This is not a benign surgery.

**DR. NICHOLAS DODMAN, BVMS, MRCVS, DVA, WESTBOROUGH
DIPLOMATE, AMERICAN COLLEGE OF VETERINARY ANESTHESIOLOGISTS
DIPLOMATE, AMERICAN COLLEGE OF VETERINARY BEHAVIORISTS**

As a veterinary surgeon, I strongly oppose the practice of devocalization. Even when performed correctly complications are common. This procedure commonly results in a condition in which the airway becomes obstructed by scar tissue or “webbing.” It causes difficulty breathing and is not only uncomfortable but can become life-threatening. Once webbing has occurred, attempts at surgical correction are fraught with failure. Another potential complication is inability of the larynx to prevent food and water from entering the trachea and lungs. Unless a medical condition exists wherein devocalization is indicated, this practice should be considered as an act of cruelty.

**DR. JOEL M. WOOLFSON, DVM, WESTON AND TOPSFIELD
DIPLOMATE, AMERICAN COLLEGE OF VETERINARY SURGEONS**

Even when performed correctly complications are common. This practice should be considered an act of cruelty.

Dr. Joel M. Woolfson, DVM
Diplomate, American College of
Veterinary Surgeons

Scar tissue can develop in the airway causing difficult breathing. This can be fatal if heat stroke occurs as a result. I have seen many dogs die this way.

**DR. ALLEN SISSON, DVM, MS, DIPLOMATE, AMERICAN COLLEGE OF VETERINARY
INTERNAL MEDICINE, ANGELL ANIMAL MEDICAL CENTER, BOSTON**

Barking is just the tip of a large and deep behavior iceberg. Debark a bored, lonely or distressed dog (the three most common reasons for so-called “nuisance” barking) and you’re begging him to express his distress through other inappropriate behaviors—such as biting.

**PAT MILLER, CERTIFIED PET DOG TRAINER, CERTIFIED DOG BEHAVIOR CONSULTANT
PAST PRESIDENT, ASSOCIATION OF PET DOG TRAINERS**

Debarking has been regarded by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons as mutilation for decades. It is an offence in the UK under the Animal Welfare Act.

DOGS TRUST, LONDON, ENGLAND

I've heard devocalized dogs trying to communicate. It is very unpleasant, dishonest for anyone to portray this procedure as mere "bark softening." Dogs and cats vocalize for a reason, which only becomes problematic when owners make it so. Even energetic dogs will bark less when owners provide the exercise and interaction they demand. Ignoring a pet's needs encourages the barking that owners complain annoys them.

One can hardly blame the animal for his owner's failure, nor remedy it by performing surgery.

DR. NANCY CROWLEY, DVM, BEVERLY

I've heard devocalized dogs trying to communicate. It is dishonest to portray this as "bark softening."

Dr. Nancy Crowley, DVM

I am a canine handler for the Central Intelligence Agency and have served duties in Afghanistan and Iraq. I cannot begin to tell you how many times a barking dog has changed a potentially dangerous situation for people just by sounding an alarm...which can be the difference between life and death. We teach the dogs when it's "ok" to bark and when we need them to be quiet.

DENNIS OAKLEY, FEDERAL POLICE CANINE HANDLER, CIA

It is meritless and manipulative for those who favor devocalization to suggest this cruel procedure must be available or seniors will have to give up their pets. Infirmary and financial concerns are the primary reasons seniors with whom I work have had to surrender their pets. What's more, because devocalization can compromise the dog's health, leading to more costly procedures, it *exacerbates* the difficulty of caring for a pet on a fixed income.

MARIE WILSON, SENIOR SERVICES PROFESSIONAL, SOMERVILLE

My husband and I have been breeding Labrador Retrievers for the last 15 years. Some dogs need more time spent with them to control unnecessary barking than others; surgically depriving them of a natural behavior is not the answer. Conscientious breeders would never consider doing this. Breeders who do should be investigated because they probably have too many animals to care for properly. Any person considering devocalization should be required to watch it being performed.

LEE HORTON, ISLAND POND LABS, MANOMET

The cocker spaniel bled profusely after he was devocalized. During recovery, he passed blood clots through his nose and mouth. He tried to cry—but couldn't.

SHAUNA LEBLANC, VET TECHNICIAN, WESTON

The cocker spaniel passed clots through his nose and mouth after devocalization. He tried to cry—but couldn't.

Shauna LeBlanc, Vet Technician

Devocalization is cruel and inhumane, purely symptomatic treatment. I have seen dogs that have undergone this procedure and had significant airway obstruction.

DR. ROBERT L. KING, DVM, WEST BROOKFIELD

Devocalization carries inherent risks regardless of the veterinarian's skill or experience. Complications may include the development of scarred vocal cord tissue referred to as "webbing," which can cause chronic coughing or gagging. Nerve damage can lead to paralysis of the larynx and a predisposition to aspiration pneumonia.

HUMANE SOCIETY VETERINARY MEDICAL ASSOCIATION

This procedure is painful and traumatic.

DR. NORM STILLMAN, VDM, PLYMOUTH

We will not perform devocalization to alter an animal's voice. It is both inhumane and counterproductive, because it neither resolves the reason for "problem" vocalization nor encourages owner responsibility. That ensures the problem will continue, expressed in a different but equally or more disruptive way.

DR. JAY JAKUBOWSKI, DVM AND DR. ASPEN HAMMOND, VMD, BROOKLINE

I will never forget my patient, a Bichon-Frise, who had been devocalized as a puppy. Devocalization didn't change the high-strung personality common in this breed. He seemed to vocalize even *more* and exhibited more agitation in his frustration to communicate. Scar tissue that developed following the surgery, performed by a highly competent, Board-certified surgeon, made anesthetic procedures later in this dog's life much more difficult.

DR. ANN THOMPSON, DVM, PLYMOUTH

Scar tissue that developed following devocalization, performed by a highly competent, Board-certified surgeon, made future anesthetic procedures much more difficult.
Dr. Ann Thompson, DVM

At graduation I swore to use my knowledge and skills for the protection of animal health and the relief of animal suffering. Having observed this procedure and its potential complications (narrowing, strictures, and webbing of the laryngeal area with secondary aspiration pneumonia, I fail to see how this benefits an animals. I feel (devocalization) is a cruel and barbaric practice.

DR. ANNE JOHNSON, DVM, FRAMINGHAM

There is no legitimate reason to subject an animal to the pain and risks of devocalization surgery unless it is deemed medically necessary.

DR. JULIE MEDLEY, DVM, NEEDHAM

I have grave concerns about the mentality that enables one to justify ordering an invasive, elective procedure with serious long-term risks for their pets. Lack of empathy for dependent animals ultimately transfers to the way we treat humans, and that spells trouble for society. Do we really want to teach future generations that it's acceptable to surgically alter our companions, to make them conform to our expectations?

RACHEL NOVAK, LICENSED CLINICAL SOCIAL WORKER, DUXBURY

Do we really want to teach future generations that it's acceptable to surgically alter our companions, to make them conform to our expectations?
Rachel Novak, LICSW, Social Worker

Just as there are numerous reasons why dogs bark, there are numerous humane methods available to control excessive barking. Devocalization does not address the underlying reason for barking. It is an invasive procedure that even when done "correctly" leaves the dog at risk of complications, some potentially serious and life-long. It is a procedure that cannot be condoned.

DR. STEPHEN W. ZANOTTI, VMD AND DR. JONATHAN E. DIEHL, VMD, WINCHESTER

Those who favor devocalization describe a procedure in which "tiny holes" are punched in the vocal cords: All devocalization surgeries compromise the animal's health. Risks include airway obstruction, reaction to anesthesia, organ failure or death, and infection. I cannot fathom any attempt to justify such an obviously unethical surgery, done only for the convenience of people.

DR. TRACY DOHERTY, DVM, BOSTON

Potential complications may make devocalization even more dangerous to the animal than ear cropping and tail docking, two practices frowned upon by most veterinarians. It is unethical to rob an animal of his voice, and cruel to perform surgery for our needs rather than theirs.

DR. MELANIE THOMAS, DVM, MEDFIELD

Those opposed to banning devocalization may argue that people can interpret dogs' body language, so there is no need for an animal to vocalize a warning he is feeling threatened. That is incorrect and dangerous. The majority of people realize a dog may bite only after the dog has barked and growled.

**ALANA STEVENSON, MS, CDBC, CSAMT
CERTIFIED DOG AND CAT BEHAVIOR SPECIALIST**

The argument that people can interpret dogs' body language is incorrect and dangerous.
Alana Stevenson, MS, CDBC,
CSMAT, Certified Dog and Cat
Behavior Specialist

Cutting the vocal cords of dogs and cats whose vocalizations bother us is not only cruel, it is a slippery attitudinal and behavioral slope. If we can justify subjecting dependent companion animals—our “best friends”—to convenience surgery, can mistreatment of dependent humans be far behind? Indeed, the American Psychiatric Association considers animal cruelty one of the diagnostic criteria of conduct disorder.

DANA GILBERT, MSW, LICENSED CLINICAL SOCIAL WORKER, NEWTON

A trainer told me about her three German Shepherds, kept in her backyard without much exercise. It's not surprising they barked constantly. They were bored and stressed. Their barking could have been relieved with basic care. Instead, she debarked all three dogs. It didn't improve their situation, only made them unable to express their stress vocally.

TRISHA DUNPHY, CERTIFIED DOG TRAINER, NORWOOD

Devocalization subjects the animal to stress, pain and potential complications for no good reason. We recommend that those who sell dogs and cats advise prospective owners of a breed's propensity for vocalization, and owners do their research as well. It is far better to *prevent* a situation in which a dog or cat faces unnecessary surgery or surrender.

COMMONWEALTH VETERINARY HOSPITAL, NEWTON

Devocalization is unethical. People need to be educated; animals do not need this surgery.

Dr. Anne Rylestone, DVM, PhD, Ware

For more information: Coalition to Protect and Rescue Pets
617-697-3374 or CPRPets@aol.com