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Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada

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A Response to Dr. Ian Dunbar

Graham Henderson

In his article, "A Strategy for Dog Owner Education," (2(1):13-15, 1981), Dr. Ian Dunbar reveals his masterplan: Pet owners are not, he claims, irresponsible, they are for the most part merely "ignorant." We must, therefore, educate them, and to do this we must somehow contrive to have potential pet owners apply for a license before they may obtain their dog. At the same time as this initial application is made, the hopeful candidate would be issued with an information package, the content of which he or she would be tested on at some indeterminate future date. Although a failure to score well on this quiz might not incur an outright rejection, it most certainly would spark a further onslaught of "information" designed to eradicate the offending areas of ignorance. The opportunity to finance this program might very well be eagerly embraced, according to Dunbar, by the "exposure-hungry" pet food industry, and the end result would be a humane society which had happily abdicated its role as "exterminator" in favor of the more gentle and refined practice of licensing.

On the surface these suggestions appear to offer a utopian solution to the nagging problem of what I, for one, still prefer to call irresponsible pet ownership. However, in the final analysis, I fear that the plan stands on questionable theoretical and practical grounds; I would caution against its implementation.

By way of background, it might be useful to outline the licensing policies of the society with which I am most familiar, The Toronto Humane Society, for I believe that this system has great potential.

The Toronto Humane Society has, in addition to its many other humane responsibilities, for years been the animal control agent for the Corporation of the City of Toronto. Under the terms of the relevant by-laws we not only operate a shelter, but administer the licensing program; it is a program which contains no proviso for "dog owner education."

Like any humane society which performs the function of licensing agent, we have the perennial problem of being regarded by dog owners as the "law." Many appear to resent our attempts to exact the license fee and, having paid their fees, are singularly unresponsive to further pleas, however desperate, for donations.

The appalling rate of return from dog owners, whom one might ordinarily expect to be quite sympathetic to a humane society, occurs for a reason. Our dog owners, I would suggest, are on the whole ambivalent in their attitude toward The Toronto Humane Society *cum* licensing agent. They view their license fee as the full extent of their "commitment" to us and are reluctant to support us in any other material way. Most people adopting animals from our shelter are even reluctant to obtain a free membership. Worse yet, there is a standard drama played out each summer by a distressing number of city residents who seem bent upon avoiding our licensing agents in an attempt to circumvent the necessity of fulfilling their legal

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obligation to tag their dog.

Given such infertile ground, I shudder to think what the response might be should The Toronto Humane Society attempt to spawn in it a program which would not only tax these people's wallets, but also their patience, time and intelligence. The experience of our Society in administering an extensive licensing program in a major Canadian city leads me to believe that any attempt to implement a system similar to that envisaged by Dunbar would lead ultimately to chaos. Even with our educationally neutral system, we find it difficult to collect from more than 50% of Toronto's dog owners; the rest are inaccessible for one reason or another. To require that the public pass tests before they could even receive a license is to court disaster openly. Delinquency rates would soar and the extent of the bureaucracy which would be required to effectively combat this delinquency would be staggering.

Dr. Dunbar speaks, moreover, of divorcing the SPCA from its role as "euthanist" (or as he more delicately puts it, "exterminator"). This is a suggestion of indeterminate merit. Inasmuch as we would like ideally to avoid euthanizing any animal at all, Dunbar strikes close to home. However, as gruesome as the task may be, it would seem to me preferable that the humane society retain its role as "euthanist" wherever possible. I believe that at the humane society the animals may go to a more peaceful and dignified death; more importantly they will probably stand a greater chance of being adopted into a good home insofar as humane societies are dedicated to this end, whereas municipal pounds may not be.

Instead of looking toward the development of a complex pre-purchase screening program, I think we must look elsewhere, but first we must get our terms straight. In the first place, I think that we would all agree that at the root of the problem is the average pet owner's inadequate understanding of his or her pet. Dunbar, for some reason, thinks that the public's failure to educate itself as to a pet's needs is not "irresponsible," and that in, as he puts it, "labelling" it so, one commits a "nominal fallacy;" which is to say, one names the problem without defining it. Unfortunately, I cannot agree, for I think we go very much further toward an understanding of the problem in defining it as one of irresponsibility than we do when we suggest that it is rooted in ignorance. There are many things in this world of which I am ignorant; I do not, for example, find it possible to understand the abstract world of quantum mechanics. This does not make me irresponsible because it is not necessary that I apprise myself of the scientific basis of this field. But it is irresponsible of me if I fail to understand the workings of my pet's mind, because it is incumbent upon me to do so. Failure to do so can *only* be deemed irresponsible whether or not this failure is a condition of relative ignorance. Dunbar has done little better himself, ironically, than to commit a nominal fallacy in "labelling" the problem as one of inadequate education, for he does virtually nothing to indicate what the content of his scheme of education would be; he only throws us off the track.

The notion that potentially good dog owners be weeded out from potentially bad ones through the injection of a "serum" of education before a license may be obtained is somewhat fanciful and raises, in my mind anyway, the spectre of Big Brother. Similarly, Dunbar's proposal that unlicensed dogs be sent with greater dispatch to the euthanasia room is distinctly Orwellian; it punishes an innocent party for another's crime.

To implement Dunbar's scheme would, as he rightly asserts, require the cooperation of a large number of organizations. But does he realize how many? In Canada it would require at the very least the involvement of two levels of government

(municipal and provincial), all humane societies, pet stores and most importantly the private, dog-owning citizen. How such an unwieldy coalition might be manipulated is, to me, frankly incomprehensible. Which is not to suggest that were Dunbar's admittedly laudable goals unattainable through any other means but these, we should not attempt to trace this treacherous way.

I cannot, however, see how the consent to such a system may be secured from what is undoubtedly the weak link in the foregoing chain: the dog owner. I believe we could expect such an individual to fight this over-regulation of his or her private life. Nor do I imagine that one could count on the already overburdened humane societies. As I have previously intimated, the administration of a major dog licensing program is a project from which the rewards are often uninspiring. The Toronto Humane Society, which I believe has an excellent system, licenses dogs in the City of Toronto at a cost of almost 47% of the revenue gained; which leaves a modest return to say the least. This is achieved through the employment of three full-time staff year round, 5 part-time clerical staff in the winter and 6 part-time license inspectors during the summer. The cost of a contingent information and education program would be, in my opinion, insupportable. Similarly, the administration of such a system would be preposterously complex, requiring test centers, computers to tabulate and issue results, massive printing bills, several mailings per applicant and, I would think, gangs of war-hardened veterans to protect the staff from the onslaughts of indignant, blood-thirsty citizens.

Dunbar's proposition that we offer to the public the option of obtaining a two- or three-year license, happily, sounds promising. Regrettably, the *Toronto Pet Survey, 1978* (commissioned and published by The Toronto Humane Society) showed that for the most part inner city residents only maintained their pets for a period of approximately two years. Furthermore, it is generally accepted that downtown (and even suburban) residents move frequently; a bi-yearly licensing program could easily lose track of those owners who, for their own reasons, wish to disappear. Perhaps rural humane societies would have better luck in this department.

Dunbar has, of course, proposed a means by which the humane society can ease the financial burden of developing his strategy for dog-owner education. However, why the pet food industry (monied as it may be) should want to finance an educational program which will almost certainly antagonize the majority of dog owners is beyond me. He is being overly optimistic when he asserts that his strategy would "certainly generate them some good press" — at best his understanding of human nature and the media is radically different from mine.

My alternative to Dr. Dunbar's system is certainly much more modest, for it really only could affect, at least at the outset, those people who would adopt from a subscribing humane society.

The Toronto Humane Society currently runs an adoption program which does involve a screening component. Those interested in adopting one of our animals must fill out a form (see below) which asks some extremely germane questions. Based on the applicants' responses to these queries, and based also in part upon additional verbal questioning, the adoption attendant may either accept or reject the candidate. Large dogs, for example, will not be adopted out to apartment dwellers; dogs or cats *may* not be given to people who have previously lost a pet through a road accident (it would depend on the circumstances); homes where no one is in throughout the day are scrutinized; and the prospective owner must indicate a willingness to spay or neuter a new pet. This system is not perfect, and we would

welcome comments from those who know better. However, for the most part, it functions and does enable us to screen out those individuals who would make poor owners. Furthermore, it affords our staff the opportunity to inform the adopter of the principles of good pet ownership. I might also add that many of the rejected candidates become violently incensed, and I am basing my critique of Dunbar's test system in part on this knowledge.

Not everyone, of course, obtains their dog from a humane society, and here one encounters a problem. Breeders might, however, be persuaded to hand out material to prospective owners, but pet stores and private transactions represent a problem. I have no idea how one could prevent private individuals from giving away or selling dogs. Dunbar, if he holds to his proposal, would have to call for a system of retroactive testing, which would create even more inducement for owners who do not have licenses for their dogs to dodge the authorities. This, of course, would be unacceptable.

It might be possible for a central licensing system to be set up. Every agency that sold animals to the public could be required to be a member and would act as a licensing agent. Each time a pet was sold, the buyer would have to fill out a license application form which would then be mailed to a central processing center for handling. The owner would then be assessed a license fee payable through the mail or in person. Failure to remit the fee could then, under suitable by-laws, result in a summary conviction. Perhaps somewhere such a system already exists; perhaps it is unworkable itself. But it does deserve some consideration.

The foregoing does not, unfortunately, effectively address the issue of dog owner education head-on. It only offers a stop-gap means of preventing certain people from obtaining pets from a humane society and informing marginal cases of the proper care of pets. If we are talking about the *real* education of dog owners then I believe we must rather look toward our school systems themselves; Dunbar is naive to think that any long-term change in owner-attitudes will be achieved through a system which calls for a one-time test situation. Humane education is rapidly becoming a fact and I think that in the very near future we will see more and more school boards requiring that it be taught in one form or another. One only has to glance at the National Association for the Advancement of Humane Education's (NAAHE) excellent prototype, the *Curriculum Integration Guide*, to realize that the elements of pet care and basic animal rights will be a part of any program of humane education. If the trends continue then I am confident that we would be correct in viewing the schools as the appropriate forum for dog owner education. Humane societies can help out here considerably, even if they only manage to organize an embryonic program of humane education which involves visits by one of their staff to the schools of their area.

I do not pretend, however, that I can offer concrete suggestions about the composition of humane education or adoption programs. I would only hope that humane societies interested in "strategies for dog owner education" seriously investigate a rigorous adoption system which may or may not be modelled upon our own. They could, moreover, develop modest or extravagant programs of humane education which might involve classroom visits and teacher contracts. Ultimately, I think we must view the process as an organic one; the seeds of humaneness which today we sow in the minds of our students will only bear fruit in the future. As humane societies and humane individuals, however, I believe that it is incumbent upon each of us to work to make that future a reality.

Toronto Humane Society Dog Adoption Questionnaire

1. Are you interested in adopting a dog for yourself, a member of your immediate family, someone else?
2. Are you 18 or over? If yes, do you live with your parents?
3. Where do you live? (House, apartment) Do you rent?
4. If you live in an apartment, on what floor? Do you have the landlord's permission?
5. Please check any of the following reasons for wishing to adopt: hunting dog, breeding, watchdog, companion, playmate for a child, guard dog for business or property, family pet, other (please explain).
6. If you have any children, please list ages.
7. Do you have any other animals at present?
8. If yes, Cat? Dog? Other _____?
9. If you have another dog, has it received its annual shots?
10. Is there someone at home during the day who will train the dog?
11. Have you had experience in housebreaking a dog?
12. Have you ever adopted an animal from us before?
13. Have you ever had a dog before?
14. If yes, what became of it?
15. Do you believe in spaying? Neutering?
16. Will the dog be kept in the home? Yard? Tied up?
17. Do you have a fenced-in yard?
18. What do you intend to do with your dog when you go on vacation?
19. Did the animals you owned in the past see a veterinarian regularly?
20. What is the name of your previous veterinarian, if any?
21. Are you willing to go to the expense and trouble of taking your dog to a veterinarian for full preventative and medical care?
22. Do you agree to have your female spayed at the Toronto Humane Society Spay/Neuter Clinic?
23. Is any member of your family allergic to dogs?
24. Have you had a dog that had distemper or died from unknown causes within the last three months?
25. Are you a member of the Toronto Humane Society? If not, would you wish to join?

Dr. Dunbar's rebuttal will be carried in the next issue, Volume 3, Number 1, 1982.
— Editors

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