



A descriptive study of 215 dogs diagnosed with separation anxiety



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ABSTRACT

Clinical records of dogs visiting a behavioral clinic were used to study the behavior and background of dogs with separation anxiety (SA). 215 dogs (with SA) were included in the study, representing 22.6% of the patients seen during the 40 months the study covered ($n = 952$). Male dogs comprised 60% ($n = 129$) of the patients, and females 40% ($n = 86$). Neutered dogs were more common in the clinical material compared to reference populations. More male dogs diagnosed with SA were neutered compared to female dogs with SA (28% $n = 37$ vs. 8% $n = 7$). Forty dogs (18.5%) were diagnosed with SA only, while 179 (82.8%) of the patients had other behavioral problems in addition to SA. The most common co-morbid diagnosis was noise sensitivities (43.7% $n = 94$). Owners of the dogs presented for clinical evaluation most commonly reported vocalization, destruction and excessive motor activity (as signs of SA). Some breeds seem to have a higher incidence of separation anxiety than other breeds. The majority of the owners were families consisting of two adults or adults with children and most of the owners obtained their dog from a breeder as a puppy. Twenty-eight (14%) of the owners were women living alone and three (1.5%) being a man living alone.

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1. Introduction

Behavioral problems are common in pet dogs (Gonzalez Martinez et al., 2011). Incidence of problems varies significantly between different populations/studies. A retrospective study of 1644 behavior cases in dogs showed that the most common problems were those involving aggression followed by anxiety-related conditions not involving aggression. Of the latter separation anxiety was the most common diagnosis (Bamberger and Houpt, 2006). Owners are most likely to notice and report behaviors that they do not like in their dog, without regard for

whether these behaviors are abnormal or a problem for the dog (Overall, 2013a), this may also reflect why aggression is the most common behavior problem reported. A high proportion of Danish dog owners stated that their dog had one or more behavior problems (29% of 4359 dogs) (Rugbjerg et al., 2003). Salman et al. (2000) reported that at least one behavioral reason was recorded for 40% of the dogs and behavioral reasons accounted for 27% of single-reason canine relinquishments in the study including a total of 2230 dogs from 12 shelters and four regions in the United States (Salman et al., 2000). High prevalence rates of behavioral problems in both American and European dog populations (Bamberger and Houpt, 2006; Rugbjerg et al., 2003) are reflected in the number of dogs being relinquished to animal shelters due to behavioral problems (Salman et al., 2000) and dogs brought to animal clinics for

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euthanasia (Haupt et al., 1996; Miller et al., 1996). Several reports show that the most common reason for euthanasia and relinquishment is the dog's behavior (Gonzalez Martinez et al., 2011; Miller et al., 1996; Mondelli et al., 2004). One third of the dogs that are adopted from shelters are returned because of the dog's behavior (Shore, 2005). A Danish study found that behavioral problems was the third most common reason for euthanasia, only preceded by old age and cancer.

The high prevalence of behavior problems including anxiety and the negative influence on animal welfare supports that increased efforts should be invested to understand the background for these behaviors. Responses to fear and stress are the root of a wide range of behavioral problems in domestic dogs, canine separation anxiety being one of them.

Dogs with separation anxiety show distressed responses to being left alone or being separated from the owner (Overall et al., 2001). When dogs experience separation anxiety they may engage in a range of different behaviors; vocalization, destruction, elimination of urine or stools, anorexia, drooling, attempts to escape and (behavioral) depression (Horwitz, 2009). Vocalization, elimination and destruction are the most commonly reported behaviors (Overall et al., 2001; Sherman and Mills, 2008). As the signs are non-specific it is important to explore other anxiety-related behavioral problems in order to make the correct diagnosis. Separation anxiety can occur alone or together with other anxiety disorders. One study showed that the probability that a dog with separation anxiety also had sound sensitivities was 63% and vice versa that the probability that a dog with sound sensitivities had separation anxiety was 88% (Overall et al., 2001).

The causes of separation anxiety are multi-factorial (environmental and genetic) and the underlying motivations, proposed in the literature are fear, anxiety, over-attachment/hyper-attachment or lack of appropriate stimulation (Horwitz, 2009). Hyper-attachment includes following the owner from room to room, including wanting to follow the owner to the bathroom, wanting to sleep next to its owner and the dog being distressed when separated from the owner (Appleby and Pluijmakers, 2004). The importance of hyper-attachment is debated in the literature, and some findings suggest that separation anxiety may be due to a different attachment style between dogs with and without separation anxiety (Parthasarathy and Crowell-Davis, 2006). A study (from Australia) suggest that separation-related distress may not be purely attachment-based (McGreevy and Masters, 2008). Separation anxiety could also be caused by a more general state of anxiety, which is suppressed when the dog is in contact with the owner (Bradshaw et al., 2002). Another study clearly found factors associated with hyper-attachment to the owner to be significantly associated with separation anxiety (Flannigan and Dodman, 2001). Different findings (contradictory results) regarding the sex of dogs with separation anxiety have been reported, (McGreevy and Masters, 2008; Takeuchi et al., 2000) found that male dogs outnumbered female dogs and that male dogs had higher probability of elevated levels of separation-related distress.

(McGreevy and Masters, 2008) also found that intact dogs showed a higher probability of high separation-related distress scores than neutered dogs, this is in contrast to the study by (Flannigan and Dodman, 2001) which found that sexually intact dogs were more than three times less likely to have separation anxiety as neutered dogs.

Several factors that could play a role in developing canine separation anxiety include periods of kennel housing, shelter housing, a history of long periods of being left alone, long periods with the owner without being left alone, the family moves to a new house/apartment and loss of another pet in the family (Sherman and Mills, 2008). A recent study showed that dogs obtained from pet stores were 30% to 60% more likely to have separation-related problems than dogs obtained from noncommercial breeders (McMillan et al., 2013). Dogs may also have a genetic predisposition to develop anxiety (Serpell, 1995).

The objective of this study is to describe characteristics of a group of dogs diagnosed with separation anxiety in order to better understand the potential genetic and environmental effects important for the etiology of anxiety.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Dogs surveyed

The study was based on clinical records (retrospectively) from a behavior clinic in Norway. All the dogs that visited the clinic and were diagnosed with separation anxiety ($n=215$, 22.9% of the total number of patients) from April 2007 to August 2010 were included in the study. Most of the dogs in this study were obtained from a breeder as a puppy (which is the most common way to obtain a pure-bred dog in Norway) while 43 dogs (21.3%) had previous owner(s) before the current owner. The neutered dogs with SA included in this study were already neutered when the owners contacted the behavior clinic.

2.2. Classification of behavior

The study is based on clinical observation of the dog from the behavior clinic, owner interviews and questionnaires. One ethologist (GL) with a master in companion animal behavior counselling made all the diagnoses during clinical consultation and was based on discussions with the owner and review of a questionnaire that was filled in before consultation. The diagnosis was made on the basis of a behavioral history and the exclusion of diagnostic differentials; and the conditions for a diagnosis of separation anxiety in this study was that the dog showed behavioral signs of distress in the absence of the owner or when the dog could not gain access to the owner when they are at home. Inclusion criteria were that the dogs showed consistent signs of destruction, vocalization and/or elimination when the owner was absent. The dogs included also showed anxiety/distress at the time of the owner's departure and/or exaggerated greeting behavior and showed signs of strong attachment to one or more family members.

The questionnaire includes basic questions about the dog and its background and sections with more detailed questions about behavior in different situations. The

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