



Elective and Non-Therapeutic Veterinary Procedures for Cosmetic or Competitive Purposes (Formerly Cosmetic Alteration)

January 24, 2020

Position

The Canadian Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA) supports promotion of the natural appearance and conformation of animals and opposes non-therapeutic veterinary procedures for cosmetic or competitive purposes.

Summary

- The CVMA views the alteration of an animal's anatomy solely for cosmetic or competitive purposes as medically unnecessary and ethically unacceptable.
- Such procedures carry the risk of unnecessary pain with the potential for chronic pain and other negative welfare outcomes.
- The CVMA encourages breeders to select for traits that promote health and wellbeing and eliminate traits that negatively affect the animal's ability to perform natural functions, thereby eliminating the need for surgical intervention.
- The CVMA strongly encourages veterinary and breed associations to take steps to make non-therapeutic procedures for cosmetic or competitive purposes undesirable or unavailable.

Background

1. Veterinarians strive to promote animal health and welfare, and to relieve animal suffering in keeping with the principles of veterinary medical ethics (1). To this end, even where the scientific evidence is not strong, the precautionary principle should be used in that it is preferable on the balance of evidence to assume that a procedure causes pain rather than to put animals at risk of suffering. Veterinarians need to consider what advantages, if any, non-therapeutic procedures offer to their patients. Surgical procedures should only be performed for the beneficial interest of the animal(s), as these procedures can carry the risk of pain, hemorrhage, infection, neuropathy and other complications. The CVMA recognizes that appropriate medical therapy may necessitate surgery to manage the health and well-being of the animal(s).

2. In Canada, provincial veterinary regulatory authorities license veterinarians, and thus, regulate the practice of veterinary surgery, including acceptable practices. The CVMA holds that licensed veterinarians are to perform veterinary surgical procedures using appropriate anesthesia, analgesia and aseptic technique (2).
3. Cosmetic alteration is any non-therapeutic veterinary procedure undertaken to change the appearance of an animal. It is done at the request of, and for the benefit of the owner. The CVMA takes the position that cosmetic alteration is not required and puts the animal's health and welfare at risk (3-8). Cosmetic surgeries do not provide any benefit to animals (9-12). Surgical alterations that are medically justified are not considered cosmetic.

Examples of cosmetic surgical alterations:

- tail docking in the canine and equine
- tail nicking/setting in horses
- ear cropping in canines
- liposuction for cosmetic purposes (excludes lipoma removal)

Examples of non-surgical cosmetic alterations:

- cosmetic dentistry
- tattooing other than for registration and identification
- body piercing
- tail injection of performance horses

4. There is evidence to suggest that cosmetic procedures cause acute and chronic pain (3,4,11,12). As well, there is evidence that many of the cosmetic alteration procedures may affect an animal's behavior, and ability to communicate effectively. For example, tail docking and ear cropping in dogs compromises the animal's ability to communicate excitement, fear and aggression effectively with other animals and people through different tail and ear postures and movements (4-6). Veterinary and breed associations should work towards educating the public that cosmetic alteration procedures can cause unnecessary pain, including the potential for chronic pain, and can have negative welfare implications in animals undergoing these procedures.
5. The CVMA strongly encourages breeders and breed associations to select for traits and promote breed standards that uphold the health and wellbeing of the animals. Responsible breeders will choose breeding stock carefully and strive to produce natural breed traits for soundness as well as the mental and physical health of the offspring (13). Cosmetic alterations change the appearance of the animal but not its genetics, and therefore are not passed on to offspring. Cosmetic alterations could be misleading to the public, buyers, and other breeders who may not be aware that an animal's appearance has been surgically altered (7,14).
6. Increasingly, many countries (e.g., most of Europe, UK, Australia, and New Zealand), and Canadian provinces are moving towards prohibiting non-therapeutic surgical procedures for the purpose of modifying the appearance of animals, in particular ear cropping in dogs, and tail docking in dogs and horses (15,16). As of July 2019, veterinarians in 9 provinces are prohibited from performing various cosmetic surgeries through provincial veterinary association by-laws and codes of practice (NL, PEI, NS, NB, MB, SK, QC, BC and AB). In addition, cosmetic surgery is illegal under the provincial Animal Health and Protection Act in Newfoundland and Labrador. Breed registries in many countries are allowing dogs, in particular, to compete and be shown in their natural state (15,17).

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((Revised October 2019))