

Thoughts on the tragic case of Lexi and Mulan

For anyone who has fought long and hard for some common sense to be brought into current 'dangerous' dog legislation, this case will have caused many people a sleepless night or two. Even more so if one has tried to impress on the 'powers that be', as I have, the urgent need for proper forensic investigation of all dog bite incidents, including fatalities, to determine cause and to enable public education regarding dog behaviour and dog bite prevention.

Even from, albeit generally unreliable, newspaper reports regarding this latest case, warning signs are emerging, obvious to any informed commentator, which are all the same being interpreted as 'without warning' and 'out of the blue' by those involved in this tragic incident.

The 'facts' that have emerged so far according to the media reports I have read are listed below. Each results in questions which urgently need to be asked and by those sufficiently expert in interpreting the answers and their implications. It is imperative that any inquest demands and takes account of such investigation and expertise.

1. An erroneous photo of a Dogge de Bordeaux as the alleged culprit on a fine choke chain accompanied by a much younger Lexi in the London Metro paper on Wednesday 6th November;

Why is a photo of dubious provenance falsely implicating a large dog breed allowed to be printed with no repercussions on the newspaper concerned? Metro staff verbally confirmed to me that this was an image supplied by a neighbour of a previously-owned dog. So where is that dog now? Is Lexi's mother a serial large dog owner? What is the significance of the choke chain? Is this how her dogs have been routinely communicated with?

2. The dog, now called 'Mulan', picked up as a stray and taken (to be rehomed if not claimed within seven days) to Willow Tree Dog Rescue, which has recently taken on the contract for Leicestershire County Council. The dog is thought to have been about 7-8 years old;

How long had the dog been in the rescue centre? Was any kind of temperament or behavioural testing carried out by someone qualified and experienced enough so to do?

3. The kennels stipulating that the dog was not suitable to live with young children, but would be 'OK if stopped from jumping up';

Was jumping up the only reason the dog was deemed unsuitable to live with young children? How was 'stopping jumping up' undertaken? Threats and coercion or rewarding an alternative behaviour, such as sitting? The presence of a choke chain on the previous dog suggests the former.

4. The dog taken on by single parent living in a flat;

Was a home check carried out prior to rehoming and/or afterwards? What exercise did the dog routinely get? On lead/off lead? How much living space/quiet time? Was the dog registered at a veterinary surgery? Had it been vaccinated? How did it behave for veterinary examination? Any

medical problems diagnosed, possibly age-related (this was a middle-aged to elderly large cross-breed)?

5. Mulan growled at Lexi and was 'told off' by Lexi's mother before launching the attack. This was interpreted by a neighbour as acting without provocation or warning.

Dogs don't growl for fun – it is a warning sign. What was Lexi doing to provoke being growled at? How many times had Mulan growled, at whom and in what context? What had been the routine response to his growling? Recognition of it as a clear warning sign and resolution of the threat from Mulan's perspective, or increasing threat and punishment of 'naughty' behaviour? Had punishment become associated with Lexi? Was the reprimand the trigger- the straw that broke the camel's back?

Of course, the overwhelming majority of dogs do not respond to reprimand with any aggression, let alone a fatal attack. The co-evolution of the intimate relationship humans have with dogs was only made possible by canine tolerance of human anger. What we haven't begun to investigate is how 'normal' dog-human relationships survive, because we spend far more time studying 'problems' – the dog who has already bitten a jogger, wrecked the furniture, eliminated in inconvenient places etc. How many dogs out there are tolerant of routine punishment without retaliation? And how far are these 'suitable' dogs convincing both certain trainers and their owners that dogs will tolerate everything we throw at them? How many preventable 'accidents' are there just waiting to happen?

But we cannot yet be sure if factors so far identified in this and any other fatality are simply correlations rather than causations. At what point therefore can we determine what combination of components have to come together to cause any dog bite as well as fatalities, rather than simply being 'innocent bystanders' in the event? Only by thorough and mandatory investigation of every event by those behaviourally qualified to do so will we gather the data to be able to inform, educate and prevent. With the greatest respect to police investigations, these are generally carried out in order to determine culpability and the viability of a prospective prosecution. Finding someone to blame is not the same as identifying cause in a non-judgmental way. It does however absolve others of responsibility in what may be, in reality, 'there but for the grace of God go we' situations.

There are indeed valuable bite prevention initiatives being implemented however it appears to me that many of these are targeted towards perceived 'irresponsible' dog owners rather than it being recognised that safety education regarding dog behaviour is essential across the whole social spectrum and from a very young age. The average 4 year old, such as Lexi, will already have been told many times not to speak to strangers, not to play with matches, and, when crossing the road, to look left, right and left again first. But where was the equally life-saving information regarding what a dog's growl means? Such education ought to be in the National Curriculum rather than being left to chance and the hit-and-miss regional provision of very well-meaning charities.

Where therefore does the overall blame lie?

If anyone is to blame for Lexi's death, to me it is the government which is consistently ignoring the need for mandatory and up-to-date education, of both children and adults, regarding dog behaviour and the dog-human relationship. It is also ignoring the need to even-handedly and thoroughly investigate all dog bite incidents, relying instead upon the adversarial system and implementation of punishment to act in a preventative manner. But could any threatened punishment, however severe, have prevented this week's tragedy? Why the apparent reluctance to insist upon expert and public investigation? Could it be that this might reveal unwelcome truths about correlations and potential causes of dog-related fatalities which will not be a vote-winner in any political party's book?

But at what price a child's life compared to complying with the public need for vengeance and thereby winning headlines and votes?

Very many more questions than answers – but it is high time that both the questions to be asked and the urgent answers required are taken seriously and used as far as humanly possible to prevent future tragedies of this nature.

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November 9th 2013