

61. Dogs – Dew claws

The NZKC does not support the proposed regulation as written.

NZKC POLICY

To prevent the potential for serious injury, NZKC allows the practice of removing front and rear dew claws from neo-natal puppies less than 4 days old or before the eyes open, whichever is first. NZKC considers that any short term discomfort is outweighed by the long term welfare advantages. The procedure should only be undertaken by suitably experienced members, vets or vet students under supervision.

Explanation

Background

Dewclaw is the name commonly given to non-weight bearing digits of animals. It is considered by many, to be a vestigial feature of the dog (having lost all or most of their original function through evolution).

Commonly, the front limb dewclaw is attached to the carpus (wrist) by a separate small metacarpal bone which forms a joint. These dewclaws have their own nerves, blood supply, muscles and tendons. As with all dogs claws, the dew claw grows in a C shape so if not maintained can either tear or grow right around to penetrate or abrade the skin. Not all front dew claws are articulated (jointed), there are no studies to show proportions of articulated verses non-articulated dew claws in dogs. There is also some breed variation. There is some anecdotal evidence to suggest the articulated dew claws provide carpal stability and assist dogs to perform in physically strenuous activities such as agility (Veterinary Information Network VIN search). No published studies are available to demonstrate a dew claws function.

Hind limb dewclaws are different in that attachment is often by way of soft tissue only, lacking direct bony connection to the hock (ankle) joint. The bony structure of the digit is the same as in the forelimb (two small bones), as is its position on the foot. The small metatarsal bone is reduced to a very small size and so often, does not articulate. The claw is most often suspended from and held in place by skin and subcutaneous tissue of the hind foot. The nerves and blood vessels are the same as that of the front leg, but the muscles and tendons are vestigial.

Maturation of the brain occurs very rapidly in dogs, especially when there is sensory input from the eyes. Minor procedures such as dew claw removal should be performed before the eyes open and this rapid maturation begins, and pain pathways develop.

To date there is no known research on the impact of dewclaw removal on the welfare of dogs (Mills et al, 2016)

NZKC Position

NZKC *does not* support the removal of dew claws for cosmetic purposes, or in puppies greater than or equal to 4 days of age unless performed by a vet or vet student under supervision and with the use of pain relief at the time of the procedure.

NZKC *does* support the removal of dew claws when undertaken to prevent future compromise to animal or human welfare. As the claw develops and lengthens, injury and/or infection can result in certain situations (long coated breeds, malformed claws, incorrect maintenance). In larger breeds there is potential for owners, members of the public, and particularly children to be injured by dogs jumping up on them if dew claws are not removed. Because dewclaws do not contact the ground, unless they are trimmed regularly, they can become caught and cause painful injuries and/or infections.

The NZKC supports removal of dew claws when done before 4 days of age, or before the eyes are open whichever is first. It is a very quick procedure with the primary intention of removing the toenail and its bed. There is no need to remove bony tissue apart from the first section up to the end of the distal phalanx that has the nail bed. Bones at this stage are still largely cartilaginous and so when the transection is made across the first phalanx, or the distal interphalangeal joint, then any discomfort is minimal. Studies to date have been equivocal in evidence of the pain response in puppies of this age. There is no need to disarticulate the joint at this age. By removing only the distal (end) portion of the digit, the risk of haemorrhage and pain is minimal when proper technique is used.

NZKC is concerned that regulating removal of dew claws to require that it can only be performed through a veterinary practise risks curtailment of the procedure with subsequent risk of serious injury to the dog and/or dog owner.

The proposed changes seem unnecessary when no evidence has been provided to suggest that there are issues associated with the status quo. To the author's knowledge, no other country in the world bans the removal of dew claws in dogs.

Breed Standards

Dew claws are mentioned in 73 of the NZKC's 218 breed standards. In reference to dew claw removal the four options outlined range from must stay on, may stay on, must be removed and may be removed. There are some breeds, e.g. the Pyrenean Mountain Dog which requires the dew claws to remain and it is thought that this is a reflection of their original "fit for purpose" function of locomotion on mountainous terrain and perceived usefulness of the dew claw. The "fit for purpose" function is also believed to apply where the breed standard requires dew claws to be removed. One example is for companion dogs such as the Papillion.

Dew Claw Removal Techniques

Figure 1 below, the image to the left, demonstrates the location of transection (cutting) to remove a dew claw on a puppy 4 days of age or younger. The right side image shows the surgical incision required prior to disarticulation of the carpometacarpal or tasto metatarsal joint which is necessary when removing articulated dew claws in adult dogs. Done in adult life, this is a significant surgical procedure.

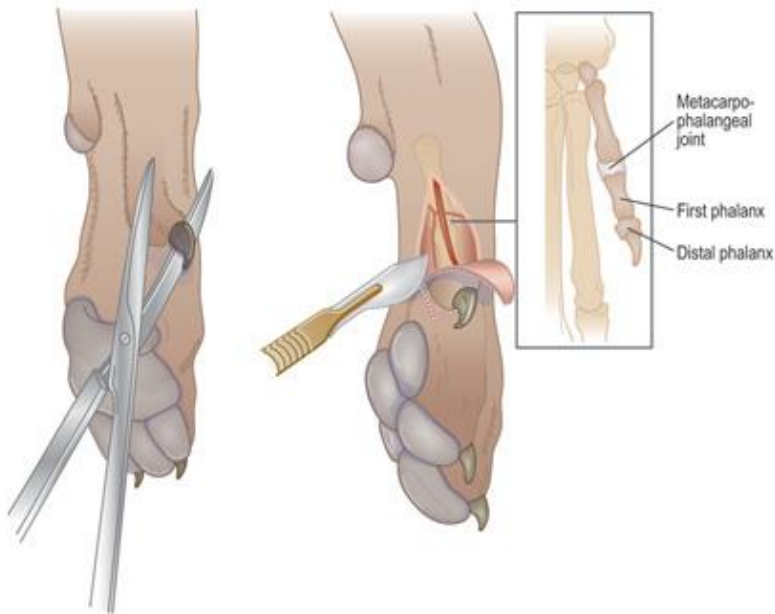


Figure 1

Figure 2 below is another demonstration of surgical amputation of dew claws in older dogs. It is a significant surgical procedure when carried out in older dogs.

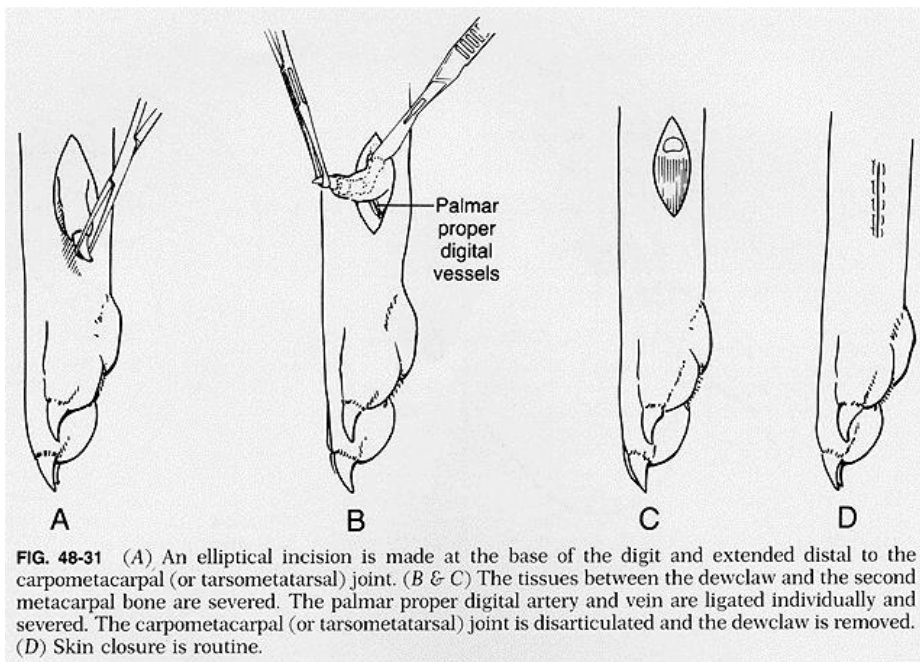


FIG. 48-31 (A) An elliptical incision is made at the base of the digit and extended distal to the carpometacarpal (or tarsometatarsal) joint. (B & C) The tissues between the dewclaw and the second metacarpal bone are severed. The palmar proper digital artery and vein are ligated individually and severed. The carpometacarpal (or tarsometatarsal) joint is disarticulated and the dewclaw is removed. (D) Skin closure is routine.

Figure 2

Figure 3 below demonstrates dew claw removal being performed too close to the carpus of the dog. Scissors are being used at the proximal portion of the digit and will most probably involve removal of the entire digit at its articulation. This extent of removal is unnecessary and may risk creating haemorrhage and discomfort.



Figure 3

The following is a series of images demonstrating a method the NZKC would approve and endorse for dew claw removal.

Figure 4 below demonstrates placement of mosquito forceps to isolate the distal portion of the digit. Correct preparation of the site, materials, and person performing the procedure is necessary to reduce the risk of infection.



Figure 4

Figure 5 below shows that the distal portion of the digit can then be removed by pushing with a fingertip or transection with scissors. The clamp then remains in place for 30-60 seconds to control any bleeding.



Figure 5

Figure 6 below shows silver nitrate being used to control any bleeding that may present.



Figure 6

Figure 7 below shows puppy post-dew claw removal.



Figure 7

In response to "Key Questions"

1. Should this area be regulated?

The NZKC believe that this procedure should be limited to individuals with sufficient training and knowledge. It is acknowledged that there is a risk of pain, haemorrhage and infection if performed incorrectly.

2. What would be the positive impacts of this regulation?

It may prevent an unknown (but likely insignificant) number of dew claw removal injuries. The NZKC believe that a quality assurance program accrediting only people with training and knowledge would address this concern.

3. What would be the negative impacts of this regulation, including costs of complying?

By not allowing removal of front, or articulated dew claws in puppies less than 4 days old by suitably trained people, there is the potential for injury and/or infection to the dog later in life. There is also a potential for injury to humans who come into contact with dew claws, particularly when considering large breeds.

This regulation is too broad and does not consider that some front dew claws are non-articulated. It does not consider that with the appropriate method of removal of the distal phalanx only, results in minimal bleeding. It does not recognise that pain perception in puppies of this age has not been sufficiently determined. There is no conclusive published evidence on the welfare of the dog when removing dewclaws to the author's knowledge. There is no published evidence to confirm function of dew claws.

The costs of compliance would be in treatment of potential dew claw injuries. In older dogs, removal of dew claws is commonly done at time of de-sexing and is a significant surgical procedure. This cost adds approximately \$150-300 to the cost of de-sexing dependant on veterinary clinic. For traumatic dew claw injury requiring amputation, costs can vary between \$300-1000 depending on the size of the dog and veterinary clinic.

There would also be costs associated with monitoring compliance. It would be difficult for compliance officers to determine if removal of front or articulated dew claws has been performed on young puppies less than four days old, unless they observe the practice, or the puppies themselves within days of the procedure. Neonatal puppies grow, and heal very quickly and so monitoring compliance would be difficult. Some dogs are born with no dew claws and so there is a potential for those in charge of the puppies to claim this as the case when in fact removal has been undertaken.

4. Would a transitional or phase in period be required to manage these impacts? If so, how long would be appropriate?

The NZKC believe that the next step is a regulated quality assurance scheme similar to the NZKC Accredited Tail Banders Scheme. This is in recognition of the potential for welfare concerns if not performed properly.

5. Are there any unintended consequence?

This proposal could lead to untrained people performing this procedure if veterinarians are unable/unwilling to do it. This would increase the potential for post procedure trauma and the likelihood that these pups would then not be presented for treatment as it resulted from an illegal procedure

6. Do you think the regulation will achieve its aim?

No, due to difficulty proving the difference between illegal (?) removal of dew claws, and true absence from birth, the NZKC believe many people will continue performing the procedure claiming the latter, but without guidance and regulation. It is likely animal welfare would be compromised significantly.

There is also the concern that retaining dew claws creates the potential for injury/infection which is greater than the potential risks associated with neonatal removal.

7. Is the current issue being managed adequately by codes of welfare or other instruments under this Act?

Yes. The Animal Welfare (Dogs) Code of Welfare 2010 provides a minimum standard which address the NZKCs concerns.

Minimum Standard No. 16 (b) says that "where dew claws are removed by a person other than a veterinarian, that person must possess the knowledge, training and competence, in relation to that procedure, that is necessary to maintain the health and welfare of the pup.

The NZKC believe this statement has the potential to translate into the requirement of membership of a Quality Assurance Scheme to perform the procedure.

8. Are there any non-regulatory options that would be more effective?

Yes. Training, accreditation and auditing non-veterinarians in Best Practice removal of dew claws where training would include:

- Indications for removal (risk of injury, infection)
- Correct technique
 - Age, on or before 3 days old
 - Distal phalanx only removed
 - Sterilisation of area, aseptic technique
 - Method of removal
- Risks of the procedure (pain, infection, haemorrhage)
- Benefits of the procedure
- Benefits and reasons for retaining dew claws in different situations

9. Has the right conduct been targeted?

No. Dew claw removal is not regulated to this extent in any other country to the author's knowledge.

A survey of stakeholders' opinions on the priority issues affecting the welfare of companion dogs in Great Britain, showed that dew claw removal was amongst those issues thought to be of least urgent welfare concern. Issues of most concern included inherited disease, puppy farming, exaggerated physical features, obesity and inappropriate socialisation (Buckland et al 2013).

10. Is the right person being held responsible?

The NZKC believe this regulation would target its member breeders as they are the only registered group. If there are problems with the procedure it is more likely to come from those in the general public who do not have as in depth animal experience and guidance, this could include back-yard breeders.

11. Are there any exemptions or defences that should apply?

As discussed previously, some puppies are born with no dew claws and so the NZKC believe people will claim this to be the case if an offence was accused. The NZKC believe this procedure should be open to all neonatal puppies, but only performed by those accredited to do so.

12. Are the penalties appropriate to the severity of the offence?

The penalties are significantly higher than any of the other proposals, and the corporate body penalty is only targeting the NZKC.

13. Is the right type of offence (regulatory or infringement) proposed?

No. The NZKC believe that there could be regulation on who can perform the procedure, with anyone else who performs it receiving an infringement.

14. Religious or cultural.

Not applicable.

Key Question for Surgical and Painful Procedures

1. What is the purpose of the procedure?

To remove the distal phalanx of the dew claw to remove the nail and its bed, on front and rear legs of dogs before 4 days old, to prevent potential for injury and/or infection to the dog and/or humans later in the dog's life. The procedure should NOT be performed for cosmetic purposes.

2. What does good practice look like?

The NZKC supports removal of dew claws when done before 4 days of age, or before the eyes are open whichever is first. It is a very quick procedure with the primary intention of removing the toenail and its bed. There is no need to remove bony tissue apart from the first section up to the end of the distal phalanx that **has the nail bed. Bones at this stage are still largely cartilaginous and so when the transection is made across** the first phalanx, or the distal interphalangeal joint, then any discomfort is minimal. Studies to date have been equivocal in evidence of the pain response in puppies of this age. There is no need to disarticulate the joint at this age. By removing only the distal (end) portion of the digit, the risk of haemorrhage and pain is minimal when proper technique is used.

3. How widespread is the procedure in New Zealand. In what situation(s) does it occur?

This procedure is very common among the NZKC membership. A significant number of submissions received from the membership on this issue relate to concerns about animal welfare should this regulation be put in place. Dew claw removal occurs in situations where there is a view by those performing the procedure, that animal or human welfare may be compromised later in the dog's life if the dew claws were to remain on.

4. Who currently performs this procedure and under what circumstances?

Veterinarians and dog owners currently perform this procedure where there is a perceived risk of compromise to animal or human welfare later in the dog's life.

Should the procedure only be performed by a veterinarian, if so, why?

No. There is risk to puppies and bitch if they are brought to a veterinary clinic before the puppies are 4 days old, with no significant benefits. This procedure can be carried out safely, with minimal risk, by non-veterinarians who have been trained, accredited and audited.

The risks of removing neonatal puppies from their home environment include hypothermia, hypoglycaemia from lack of feeding, rejection by the mother due to stress and nosocomial infection.

Should a non-veterinarian be able to perform this procedure, if so, under what circumstances?

Yes, non-veterinarians who are have appropriate training and knowledge should be able to perform this procedure in neonatal puppies less than four days of age, or before their eyes open.

5. Where there is a new requirement for a veterinarian to be involved or additional pain relief, are there any additional implications (including cost) associated with these new requirements?

There will be costs involved with veterinarians removing front or articulated dew claws in puppies where therapeutic rationale is determined. It is thought these costs would be marginal when done in neonatal puppies, but would vary depending on clinic and location.

6. Are there alternatives to the current practice that are less harmful?

Removal of dew claws in puppies under four days old must be done by transection of the distal phalanx or distal interphalangeal joint. There are no known alternatives to transection.

References

- Mills KE, Keyserlingk MAG, Neil, L. A review of medically unnecessary surgeries in dogs and cats. *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* 2016;248:162-171
- Buckland EL, Whiting MC, Abeyesinghe SM, Asher L, Corr S, Wathes CM. A survey of stakeholders' opinions on the priority issues affecting the welfare of companion dogs in Great Britain. *Universities Federation for Animal Welfare* 2013, 22:239-253