



Use Your Voice to Protect TheirsSM

United Against Devocalization

A campaign of Coalition to Protect and Rescue Pets

EXPERT PERSPECTIVES ON DEVOCALIZATION OF DOGS AND CATS

The following statements are among the hundreds submitted by veterinarians, animal shelters and adopters of devocalized animals across the United States to explain why they support prohibition of vocal cord surgery on dogs and cats with only one exception: to treat a physical ailment causing the animal medical harm.

VETERINARIANS

As a Board-certified veterinary surgeon, I have treated animals for complications of devocalization performed through the open mouth, so-called "bark softening." Whether done that way or through an incision in the neck, whether a portion or the entire vocal cord is altered, the risks and damage are unacceptable. Even a small cut bleeds and forms scars. One common result is a condition in which the airway becomes obstructed by scar tissue. This is not only uncomfortable but can become life-threatening. Attempts at surgical correction are fraught with failure. Another potential complication is inability of the larynx to prevent food and water from entering the trachea and lungs. This practice should be considered an act of cruelty.

Joel M. Woolfson, DVM, Diplomate, American College of Veterinary Surgeons

I had an 18-month-old Labrador Retriever patient that was devocalized and sold to an unsuspecting pet owner. He had breathing difficulties, tired quickly when he tried to play, and coughed and gagged every time he ate and drank. Scar tissue in his throat, a result of devocalization, was the cause of these problems. Referral to a veterinary surgeon to remove the scarring was not an option for his owners due to cost. We had to euthanize this poor guy.

John Green, DVM

Vocal cord surgery on dogs and cats should only be performed to treat a physical condition causing the animal medical harm. To perform it as behavioral intervention is an act of cruelty.

Mark Verdino, VMD, MBA, Vice President of Medical Services

North Shore Animal League America, the world's largest no-kill animal shelter

I will never forget my patient, a Bichon-Frise, who had been devocalized by a highly competent, Board-certified surgeon. Scar tissue that developed in the throat following the surgery made anesthetic procedures later in this dog's life much more difficult and dangerous.

Ann Thompson, DVM

In my work at the university, I came in contact with many devocalized dogs. This procedure is medically unwarranted and contraindicated. Animals who undergo devocalization experience considerable pain; because the surgery is done in an area that is in constant use (the upper airway), there is no way for the animal to avoid it as might be the case with other surgeries. Not only does devocalization violate the principles of veterinary medicine, it also is contrary to the norms of compassion and humanity.

**Nedim C. Buyukmihci, VMD, Emeritus Professor of Veterinary Medicine
School of Veterinary Medicine, University of California-Davis**

I have had the unfortunate experience of treating a dog who was given up after he was devocalized. The dog presented with chronic throat inflammation, the result of having had vocal cord tissue cut to suppress his voice. He still would try to bark, but experienced pain with every attempt. When very excited, he'd bark despite the pain, which in turn caused infections. Life post-devocalization is miserable for animals.

Alexander Klein, DVM

Regardless of the method by which it is performed, devocalization exposes the animal to the possibilities of infection, blood loss, inhalation of liquids and solid foods into the lungs, and the risks of anesthesia. It can trigger scarred vocal cord tissue regrowth, which can lead to aspiration pneumonia, heatstroke and choking, and may necessitate additional corrective surgeries. Other long-term consequences can include chronic coughing and gagging and breathing difficulties. There are much more humane ways to deal with vocalization.

Barbara Hodges, DVM, MBA, *Humane Society Veterinary Medical Association*

When laryngeal surgery is performed for **medical** purposes (for example, removing tumors), it is only after all other treatment options have failed; the reason is the high complication rate associated with the procedure. Removing part of a healthy larynx solely to suppress an animal's voice is as medically unwise as it is unethical. It can never be justified.

Gary Block, DVM, MS, Diplomate, American College of Veterinary Internal Medicine

I've heard devocalized dogs trying to communicate, a very unpleasant sound. It is dishonest for anyone to portray this as "bark softening." Dogs and cats have needs; ignoring them encourages the persistent barking or meowing that owners complain annoys them. One can hardly blame the animal for his owner's failure, nor remedy it by performing surgery on the animal's vocal cords.

Nancy Crowley, DVM

Our clinic was asked to devocalize a cat; we refused. I have personal experience with devocalization: I adopted a five-year-old devocalized Sheltie. The pitiful, raspy noise that Faith made was heartbreaking, as were her repeated bouts of inhalation pneumonia that were a result of her devocalization surgery. Faith's life was a never-ending rollercoaster of antibiotics and other pulmonary medications; devocalization was directly responsible for that and her death. The procedure **cannot** be done so there is no potential for an adverse outcome.

Barry Taylor, DVM

As a veterinary behaviorist I've treated dogs *and* cats for "excessive" vocalization. There is always a reason, whether a learned behavior that has been rewarded, an alarm for the family or an expression of distress or anxiety. Whatever the reason, it can be treated by understanding and humanely managing the cause. Vocal cord surgery does nothing to address the issues that underlie vocalization; it should never be performed as behavior intervention. Veterinarians have an obligation to "first do no harm," an ethical guideline always worth remembering.

Ilana Reisner, DVM, PhD, Diplomate, American College of Veterinary Behaviorists

Devocalization offers the patient no advantage, only risks, some of which may be life-threatening. I have treated devocalized dogs and can attest the voice they are left with is painful to hear.

Michael Ferrigno, VMD

ANIMAL SHELTERS AND RESCUE ORGANIZATIONS

Rebound Hounds ResQ always screens prospective adopters. We had no reason to believe the person who adopted 5-year-old Charlie would harm him. But she did. **She had a local vet cut his vocal cords. A year later, she no longer wanted him.** When we picked him up, we noticed immediately that he wheezed and his voice sounded terrible. He has shortness of breath too. The woman who had this done to him calls it "bark reduction." We call it cruel.
Donna Darrell, Co-Founder, Rebound Hounds ResQ

We have taken in devocalized dogs. Most had respiratory problems and some died as a result of this unnecessary procedure. There is no justification to devocalize an animal.
Cathy Derench, Founder, That Newfoundland Place

We have adopted out devocalized Standard Poodles. One had been tethered outside most of the day, and barked his loneliness. After having him devocalized, the owner gave him up. The claim that surgically altering a dog's voice will prevent abandonment is absurd.
Amanda Lion, Board Member, Poodle Rescue of New England

As director of a humane society and a pet owner, I assure you: devocalization does **not** keep animals out of shelters, responsible people do. I adopted a dog whose owner had him devocalized then didn't want him. Logan rasped and retched, coughed and gagged as a result of the devocalization every day till he died. There is no need for this procedure. Some breeds of dogs and cats vocalize more than others. Consider that before bringing a pet home or deciding to breed them. Also consider whether you can provide an appropriate environment and care. A dog left alone much of the day is more likely to bark excessively, and one who is easily excitable may not be the best choice for an apartment. Devocalization is not the solution. It is cruel.
Gayle Fitzpatrick, Founder/President, Friends of the Plymouth Pound

Our shelter has had dogs surrendered to us **after** they were devocalized. All had multiple complications, physical and behavioral. A Cavalier King Charles was left with constant gagging. A cocker spaniel exhibited breathing difficulties. A third dog was surrendered because the family obtained another dog after devocalizing her and they did not get along. We adopted her out, but she was returned to us two weeks later for **biting**. It's not surprising. Cutting vocal cords doesn't address a dog's needs. Instead, by allowing the owner to ignore them, it ensures the dog will act out in other ways, such as biting or house soiling.
Pamela Green, Executive Director, Kent Animal Shelter

I know of a little dog who choked to death after his bark was "softened" by his vet. Had he been turned in to us rather than forced to undergo this horrific operation, we would have found him a wonderful home that would provide the time, attention, training and love that a dog needs.
Shirley Moore, Executive Director, Save A Dog

Barking is not a reason dogs lose their homes; irresponsible owners are.
Kathy McLoughlin, Founder, Tiny Treasures Rescue, Yonkers, NY

A dog was relinquished to us for what the owner said was incessant barking. It turns out she left him alone nearly the entire day. Of course he barked! He was calling out for the companionship, exercise and play animals require. In our care, he barks appropriately.
Tracy Muscatello, Owner, HeartsHerd Animal Sanctuary

Surgery to mask a dog or cat's voice serves no purpose but convenience. The reasons animals are surrendered to us are divorce, moving, allergies, financial concerns and the owner's death, not barking or meowing. Even devocalized animals lose their homes.
Denise Adams, Animal Care Manager, Wanderers' Rest Humane Association

ADOPTERS OF DEVOCALIZED ANIMALS

I am a Registered Veterinary Technician, and I've witnessed many dogs who suffered complications after licensed veterinarians performed surgery to stifle their voices, including scar tissue build-up in the throat area causing partial airway blockage. They gagged while trying to eat their food and drink water, and some had fainting spells (syncope). Some suffered so badly that the humane option was euthanasia. One of my own dogs, Colby, suffered daily coughing and gagging spells that sometimes caused him to faint because his previous owner subjected him to this surgery. He died at the young age of 3 as a result. There is no need for this surgery. I don't understand how anyone, especially a veterinarian, can ethically justify it.

Kristy LaDue, RVT

Porter's previous owner had her veterinarian cut his vocal cords. Although the vet had performed many "bark softening" procedures like this, notching vocal cords through Porter's mouth, scar tissue formed over 50% of his airway. We paid for a \$2,000 surgery to remove the blockage--an expense we hadn't anticipated when we adopted Porter--but he still will never breathe or bark normally again.

Sue Perry

When I was working as a taxi driver I met a woman with many cats, and she let me keep one. I started noticing he would try to meow but nothing would come out. My vet told me my cat had been devocalized. He bobs his head back and forth trying to make noise. Sometimes it looks like he's having a seizure.

Michael Moisson

I adopted a 4-year-old Standard Poodle whose first owner had her vocal cords cut, then gave her up. She was adopted and given up **again**. Piper coughs and gags frequently. I worry constantly that she'll choke on her food. Her voice doesn't have distinguishable sounds, so it's hard for her to communicate with people and other dogs. Piper is very smart and compliant. She could have been taught not to bark. Instead, someone took the lazy way out by making her endure this very cruel surgery. She'll suffer the rest of her life for it.

Eryn Wisdom

The idea that devocalization helps owners keep their dogs doesn't make sense. My Jet was devocalized and her first owner still let her loose to fend for herself. Jet has issues breathing, and makes noises that other dogs and even people think are weird; they think Jet must be aggressive. Jet is the sweetest dog you will ever meet. She just can't breathe normally. I can't begin to tell you how often even humans rebuke Jet's attempts at showing affection, and it all stems from her devocalization. No other dog should have to go through what Jet experiences every single day.

Amanda Trisdale-Rundell

I adopted a 3-year-old cocker spaniel whose first owner subjected her to "bark softening" surgery. When Demi was spayed, scar tissue from being devocalized made it difficult to keep her airway open during the procedure. Even a little exercise stresses Demi, and she can't bark at all, just whine. Whining is no more pleasant to hear than barking.

Cynthia Martin

Our black Lab, Fritz, wasn't "good enough" to be bred, so he was devocalized, then put in a cage outside and ignored. That's when we came in and got him. Fritz sounds hoarse as if he's smoked 50 cigarettes a day and he gags when he eats. Even water won't go down comfortably; he spits some of it back up.

Kate Sanders-Pedersen

We adopted a young yellow Lab who had been devocalized. Stella experienced traumatic respiratory problems, which our vet said was a direct result of the devocalization. When we took her out to play, we noticed she had a hard time breathing, and it got progressively worse. She was really struggling to breathe and sometimes was collapsing. Two very costly surgical procedures saved Stella's life by removing the scar tissue that blocked her airway. But they couldn't save her voice; she is permanently mute. I can't leave her alone in the backyard, because she can't bark to tell me if she's hurt or someone has come into the yard. To know what she needs, we always have to have her in our line of vision.

Dottie Veneto

I have a collie that I adopted. Her vocal cords had been cut. She is a sweet girl, but it is sad to hear her little whispery sounds and she frequently coughs and hacks as if something is lodged in her throat.

Virginia Young

BEHAVIOR, TRAINING AND OTHER EXPERTS

I have met dogs who were devocalized and still given up to rescue organizations. The procedure does not stop the act of barking, but what comes out is a horrible, strained and harsh sound. As a professional dog trainer and an urban pet owner, I find this to be cruel and shortsighted. There are many reasons dogs bark and cats meow; I want to know why a particular animal is behaving in a problematic way and work to find a humane solution. I know from experience that when the basic needs of training, exercise, mental stimulation and attention are met, so-called "nuisance" barking is not a problem.

Viviane Arzoumanian, CPDT-KA, CBCC-KA, Certified Professional Dog Trainer

Barking is the tip of a large and deep behavioral iceberg. Devocalize a bored, lonely or distressed dog, the most common reasons for so-called "nuisance" barking, and you're begging him to express his distress through other inappropriate behaviors—such as biting.

**Pat Miller, CPDT-KA, CBCC-KA Past President, Association of Pet Dog Trainers
Board of Directors, Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers**

Dogs and cats use distinct vocal sounds to express different emotions and needs, such as joy, fear, animosity or pain. Devocalization removes or reduces these distinctions, putting animals as well as people at risk. Non-vocal communication is not sufficient, as some claim. The majority of people do not know how to interpret dog and cat body language, especially when the animal is not their own. Audible, unambiguous vocal expression is essential for the safety and well-being of animals and the humans with whom they interact both in the home and in public.

Alana Stevenson, MS, BCCAB, CPDT-KA, CSAMT, Certified Professional Dog Trainer

Over the past 40 years, I've trained more than 44,000 dogs of all breeds, ages and temperaments, including those characterized by their owners as "nuisance" barkers. With consistent training, every one of them learned when to be quiet. There is no such thing as an untrainable dog. There are, however, irresponsible dog owners. Training requires Patience, Perseverance and Perspiration. Some people don't want to invest that effort, using devocalization as an easy substitute for responsible care and training. That is inhumane and counterproductive. Surgically altering a dog's voice doesn't fix the reason it is barking or teach the dog to obey its owner. An owner who is not in control of his animals presents a risk to the public.

**Anthony Jerone, Master Dog Trainer
Founder, NYC Transit Authority's Canine Patrol Program**

There are many possible causes for persistent meowing, medical as well as behavioral. Hyperthyroidism, decreased vision or hearing, cognitive dysfunction disease (similar to Alzheimer's) or painful conditions such as arthritis may cause cats to vocalize more. Treatment, not devocalization, is needed. Behavioral causes, such as insufficient mental stimulation and exercise, can be easily remedied by enriching the environment, providing positive reinforcement training and spending time interacting with your vocal cat. Cutting vocal cords will not solve the underlying problem. It will only add to an unhappy cat's suffering.

Stephanie Borns-Weil, DVM, Tufts Animal Behavior Clinic

We get calls every day from desperate people forced to give up their pets, not because of barking or meowing, but as a result of the high cost of veterinary care!

Edita Birnkrant, Campaigns Manager, Friends of Animals

Barking doesn't hurt seniors, but biting does. The dog who can't clearly bark a warning he's about to bite is a danger to his owner *and* other senior housing residents. Seniors may not be able to hear or understand the muffled, indistinguishable sounds a devocalized dog makes. And do not expect those with reduced vision or impaired cognition to interpret the dog's body language.

Andrea Ellen Keigan, Senior Adult Housing Management Consultant

I am a canine handler for the Central Intelligence Agency and have served duties in Afghanistan and Iraq. I cannot begin to tell you how many times a barking dog has changed a potentially dangerous situation for people just by sounding an alarm...which can be the difference between life and death. We teach the dogs when it's "ok" to bark and when we need them to be quiet.

Dennis O., Federal Police Canine Handler, CIA

Domestic animals look to us for humane leadership; it is one of the ways in which we build a bond with them for our mutual benefit. Cutting vocal cords to suppress the animal's voice does not allow that bond to develop. It is easier to cut vocal cords than to provide appropriate care and training. It can be quite profitable to breed animals wherever one chooses. And it may be instantly gratifying to bring home a cute but innately "talkative" breed of dog or cat rather than select one more suitable for one's environment and noise tolerance. None of these things justify devocalization.

Juliet Sternberg, LMSW

Devocalization is a deplorable act of animal cruelty. Even devocalized dogs and cats may bite, jump on people, soil public property, run into traffic, dig up the neighbor's garden. There are no surgeries to correct these behaviors. *Responsible* people who train, supervise and provide proper care of their animals do. They do not devocalize.

Kelly McCartney, Director of Animal Control

INFORMATION

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