

## CANINE CONTROL

# The stray dilemma for animal groups

One plans to sterilise 400 industrial dogs this year, but it may not save them from being culled

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THE volunteers get stray dogs sterilised, shelter them for a few days while they recuperate, then release them back where they came from, whether factories, industrial estates or the neighbourhood.

This year alone, one animal welfare group, Noah's Ark Cares, hopes to get 400 industrial dogs sterilised, in an effort to curb Singapore's growing stray population.

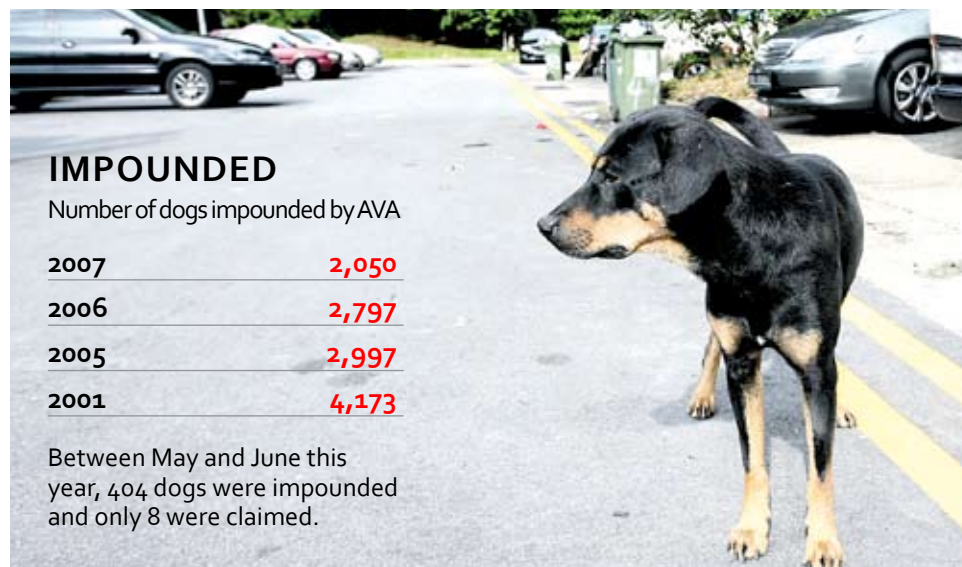
All this adds up in terms of personal time and costs — some \$250 a dog — but for all their efforts, the dogs still risk being caught and culled by the authorities.

Responding to TODAY's queries, the Agri-food and Veterinary Authority (AVA) said it does not condone the release of sterilised dogs into the environment, and it would round them up if they are found in public places.

"The sterilised dogs should be rehomed and licensed but not released into the environment," said Mr Madhavan Kannan, head of AVA's Centre for Animal Welfare and Control. Last September, the AVA had introduced tougher penalties for dog-owners to discourage abandonment, including a fine of up to \$5,000 for not leashing one's dog in public.

The problem? There are more dogs than there are people willing to take them in, and animal shelters such as the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) and Doggie Rescue Shelter are already overwhelmed.

"Every year, the SPCA receives around 9,000 animals; only a tenth find homes,"



TREVOR TAN

## IMPOUNDED

Number of dogs impounded by AVA

2007	2,050
2006	2,797
2005	2,997
2001	4,173

Between May and June this year, 404 dogs were impounded and only 8 were claimed.

said its executive officer Deirdre Moss. "Not only are we competing with the many pet shops and pet farms to find homes for these animals, there are also limited avenues to re-home dogs because of restrictive housing board rules and no restriction to commercial breeding."

So why do volunteer groups such as Noah's Ark and Action for Singapore Dogs (ASD) persist with sterilisation, if their efforts are undone when the dogs are caught and put down? Their response: It is better to have sterilised strays roaming the streets than unsterilised ones that could add to the stray population.

### A TOUGH SELL TO THE PUBLIC

Noah's Ark launched its Project Industrial Dogs scheme in June 2005 providing low-cost sterilisation, while ASD started its scheme in 2002. Noah's Ark president, Ms Chew Gek Hiang, said the group often tries to get factory owners to take ownership of the dogs in their compounds.

"We encourage them to sterilise the dogs, have them micro-chipped and licensed."

At Alexandra Village, where stray dogs have been a fixture for years, workshop owners that TODAY spoke to supported a mass sterilisation programme, although most were reluctant to share the costs.

Pointing to a dog nearby, Mr Tay Tai Hua, 58, of Champion Auto Air-conditioner Company said: "This dog is very pitiful. She gives birth three times a year. It would be good if she was sterilised, but I don't know if I want to pay for it."

Sterilised dogs are identified by a clipped left ear, and according to ASD's president Ricky Teo, the group used to sterilise 10 to 20 dogs a month — but they kept getting culled by AVA, so they now only sterilise pregnant industrial dogs, which number two to five a month.

He added: "We just had to pay \$500 to bail a sterilised dog out of AVA's pound this week. The dog was outside the factory's premises when it was trapped. All this is extra cost."

For the strays' sterilisation procedure, vets charge the groups a subsidised rate but even so, to achieve its target this year,

### FELINE DEJA VU?

The AVA supported a Stray Cat Rehabilitation Scheme but it was terminated in 2003 amid the Sars outbreak.

This scheme was started in HDB estates in 1998 as a way to control the stray cat population humanely through sterilisation. It was up to volunteer organisations to convince individual town councils to take part. Sixteen Town Councils and 500 volunteers were involved.

Today, the Cat Welfare Society continues to run the scheme but volunteers have complained of sterilised cats being culled.

Noah's Ark needs to raise \$50,000.

While animal activists maintain that sterilisation is a more effective way of reducing the stray population — since new strays will simply enter the area where dogs have been culled, and multiply — have they managed to convince the public of the merits of their case?

Said Mr YK Chan, 50, a security guard who patronises the Alexandra Village hawker centre: "I'm afraid of dogs. Some are more aggressive than others; I was bitten when I was a child."

But sales executive Kelvin Yong, 27, said: "So long as the dogs are not near populated areas, I think we should give the sterilisation project a go."

Dog trainer Patrick Wong said sterilised dogs are generally less aggressive and are not likely to roam, especially if caregivers provide food.

"Unless cornered or perceived as a threat, most dogs will leave humans alone," he said. And if faced with a strange dog? "Remain calm and walk steadily. Do not run, scream or appear frightened."

## Home alone, with a panic button

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It caters to anyone with special needs left alone at home, not just the elderly but also the physically-challenged, children and those recuperating after illness, said Mr Alex Chong, HealthTrend's director for strategic business.

Meanwhile, Philips Lifeline — the leading provider of such a service in the US, with over 700,000 subscribers — believes its system "absolutely will work in Singapore" because of its sophisticated market, said its chief executive Ron Feinstein.

Its US subscribers are mostly women aged 75 or so, living alone. But on average, fewer than 4 per cent of the 25,000 calls each day to Lifeline relate to an emergency. Some call just to chat, out of loneliness. One client rang in a panic when a burglar broke into her house.

And if a subscriber does not check in with them for, say, a

month, an operator will call up to make sure their Lifeline system is working and that they are fine.

### NOT COST-EFFECTIVE YET?

In places such as the US and Taiwan, demand for such a homecare service is being driven by an aging population, more elderly persons choosing to live on their own, and the country's shortage of care-givers — all issues that are finding growing resonance in Singapore.

The difference? As Adroit Instrumentation's manager Jong Yong can testify, there is a troubling lack of awareness among the public of the value of such a service.

The company had introduced its Adcare Elderly Care Solution to Singapore seven years ago, with a call centre here and monthly subscription fees.

But two years ago, it had to "change direction" and add a more cost-effective version —



A senior wearing HealthTrend's emergency button.

involving only a one-time fee of \$600 to \$700 for which clients got 10 pre-programmed phone numbers that would be activated in case of emergency, instead of access to the call centre.

Current homecare service providers see room in Singapore for this service to grow, giving assurance to busy executives who have

to leave their elderly parents at home. According to one geriatrician, each year, about one in three people above 65 will have a fall.

While some studio flats for seniors have been fitted with pull-strings connected to an alarm system, Ms Lim Sia Hoe, the general manager of NTUC ElderCare Co-operative, said the button device offered its user more mobility.

But the big question is cost. HealthTrends is working with local groups, government bodies and sponsors to offer subsidies or sponsorship. Current price plans work out to \$1 to \$2 a day. One plan allows the subscriber to pay \$538 upfront for the alarm system and a monthly fee of \$38; the other is a monthly subscription of \$68 under a one or two-year contract.

Mr Chew Hai Chwee, the chief executive of Bright Vision Hospital said his private view was that "the needy in Singapore will look at it as another cost item, and the people who can afford maids

would provide maids to look after their parents or grandparents".

Still, he conceded it would be a boon to the single elderly who "can stay at home instead of going to a nursing home".

Could the government help subsidise or provide such a service?

Dr Tham Weng Yew, president of the Home Health Care Association, said the lack of population-based studies — showing how this service improves morbidity and mortality rates — makes it "difficult to justify implementing it on a large scale, especially if it involves public funding".

But ElderCare's Ms Lim thought the Government could help reduce the marketing costs of such services through consolidated publicity for the silver market.

China Healthcare Limited's marketing director Sally Lum suggested the provider of the service work with grassroots groups or the Community Development Councils, to reach out to residents.