

Choosing A Qualified Animal Behaviour Consultant

In Australia there is no legislation to regulate the qualifications and training of people offering services for the treatment of behavioural problems in companion animals. Animal Behaviour Consultants do not have to be registered with a regulatory body like a veterinarian, or psychologist does to ensure there is a minimum professional standard of treatment and training. In essence any person may call themselves an animal consultant, and legally treat a serious and complex behavioural problem in dogs and cats.

As a result dog owners are often misled by people misrepresenting their qualifications and experience and who offer services that they are not adequately trained to provide. The availability of equipment such as electronic devices in retail outlets or by mail order further increases the likelihood of a serious behavioural problem being incorrectly diagnosed and treated.

Who is a qualified animal behaviour consultant?

A fully qualified Applied Animal Behaviour Consultant is usually a veterinarian, psychologist, zoologist or biologist with an advanced degree (P.hD) in animal behaviour or in other behavioural and biological sciences, or a veterinarian who has completed further study in animal behaviour as prescribed by the Australian Veterinary Association.

A qualified animal behaviourist:

- * is qualified to treat behavioural problems in any species of animal
- * has specialised academic training in relevant behavioural or veterinary sciences, a study program that facilitates their ability to accurately diagnose and treat a behavioural problem
- * is able to appear in court as an expert witness in matters pertaining to animal behaviour

Who is not a qualified animal behaviour consultant?

A person who is not qualified will generally be unable to meet the above criteria, and will usually omit any reference to academic training in psychology or applied animal behaviour, or the word "qualified" in their C.V. Terminology such as "trained in", "studied animal behaviour" or "behavioural trainer or therapist" may be used to describe themselves, and "providing successful outcomes or solutions" as their results. These people have generally completed a short course in animal behaviour often by correspondence, have been a dog obedience instructor or have attended one or two day seminars or workshops run by qualified animal behaviourists or held at a recognised academic institution.

Use of the terminology "Certification or Accredited"

" The term "certificated" or "accredited" does not always equate to "qualified". In accordance with the standards of the Animal Behaviour Society, a internationally certified animal behaviorist must have at least a Masters degree in either Ethology, Psychology, or Applied Animal Behaviour, must have apprenticed for an extended period under an applied animal behaviourist certified by the Animal Behaviour Society, and must have conducted a significant amount of peer reviewed behavioural research. Application for certification is voluntary as is membership of the society.

There are many organisations (that are not registered academic accrediting bodies) that people with an interest in animal behaviour can join, and who provide “certification” or “accreditation” to their members upon completion of their courses, or by meeting the certifying criteria of that organisation. The person may or not be academically qualified as an animal behaviourist. Certification only tells you that the individual has met the requirements of education, experience, and professional ethics of the organisation that has certified them. Dog owners are advised to check the website of the certifying body to ascertain the criteria for certification.

“Lifetime guarantee”

A qualified animal behaviour consultant will provide ongoing assistance for a dog’s life, and this should not be confused the “lifetime guarantee” offered by some trainers. During the lifetime of a dog many circumstances can affect its behaviour, and it is impossible to guarantee that the original treatment strategies will always be applicable. A “lifetime guarantee” generally means that the trainer will provide ongoing assistance to the best of their ability and knowledge, using their method of treatment. It may however be difficult to guarantee work if the person providing the treatment is not fully qualified in animal behaviour. Dog owners are urged to check the qualifications of the service provider, and that the guarantee is not null and void if further assistance is sought from a qualified person.

“Books and Websites”

Whilst books, videos and material available on the internet may help pet owners provide a good basic understanding of animal behaviour and their dog’s problem, some information is confusing, contradictory and incorrect. It is important therefore that the author’s background and experience in the area they are providing information on is thoroughly checked. However given that most information takes a broad based approach it is unlikely that a serious and complex problem will be solved in this way



Seeking an animal behaviour consultant?

Prior to seeking assistance for a behavioural problem a pet should be taken to a veterinarian for a physical examination. This eliminates medical factors and enables a discussion with a familiar professional that knows the pet, can provide advice and refer you to a qualified animal behaviour consultant for further assistance.

Ten important questions need to be asked to ensure that you engage an animal behaviour consultant that is appropriately qualified, can accurately diagnose and apply a treatment program using techniques that you are comfortable with, that can be integrated into your lifestyle and is appropriate for your pet.

1. Ask the service provider directly as to their formal qualifications, where they obtained these qualifications and what experience they have had in dealing with your problem.
2. Explain your situation by providing details of the animal, the history of the problem and the steps you have taken to date, and ask for a diagnosis.
3. If the diagnosis seems incorrect (e.g. if your dog is anxious and you are told you are not being dominant enough or it is trying to be the leader of the pack), or the service provider cannot explain how they arrived at the diagnosis, then seek a second opinion.
4. Seek details of how the problem would be treated, the methods to be used and the system of training (food, voice, throw chain). Treatment should include a range of options, not just dog training and should include a written program. The animal behaviour consultant will generally offer a few suggestions, but for problems involving aggression or potential legal issues the animal will need to be seen.
5. There are no set rules for dogs in the home (where it is kept or what it can do), so check as to whether the animal behaviour consultant is not too inflexible as this may adversely affect your relationship with your dog.
6. Take notes and make sure you understand the diagnosis and treatment methods prescribed. Asking for an explanation of any terminology or procedure used, will often alert you to any limitations or lack of experience the consultant has.
7. Obtain details as to the length of the consultation, what the fees include, who should attend, any special requirements or equipment, degree of input required, likely prognosis and action if the problem is not treated.
8. Compare costs with other animal behaviour consultants as fees are not necessarily higher for a fully qualified person.
9. If a person claims to be affiliated with an organisation or authority (past or present), to have "studied" with a well know animal behaviour consultant or is "certified" or "accredited" then seek further details so that you can verify these claims.
10. If the animal behaviour consultant makes you feel guilty about your problem, or sees it as totally your fault, then seek assistance elsewhere, for it is unlikely that you get the understanding and empathy necessary to assist you deal with a difficult situation.

By choosing an animal behaviour consultant that is fully qualified and experienced you will increase the likelihood of you pet receiving the best help available. If you are comfortable with the person, then book a consultation for your pet.