

*Full Length Research Paper*

# Tail docking in dogs: Evaluation of current practices and ethical aspects in southwest Nigeria

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This study evaluated the current practices of tail docking in dogs routinely performed in southwest Nigeria, as well as their ethical issues. The data were collected by means of a structured questionnaire provided to breeders/owners besides an audit of retrospective case records. The results indicated that tail docking was performed and embraced by all practices and breeders/owners surveyed, with higher frequency of Rottweiler (76.7%) in comparison to PitBull (56.0%) and Boerboel (51.2%) breeds. Seventy four percent of breeders docked for customary/traditional reason while others did so for reasons which included improved appearance (53.6%), convenience and pleasure (46.4%), better hygiene (28.0%), ease of mating (14.2%), enhanced aggressiveness (7.1%) and prevention of injuries (7.1%). Most practices (97.4%) docked for non-therapeutic purposes. Sixty five percent of respondents docked at 2 to 3 weeks of age while others did at less than 2 weeks (11.6%) and above 3 weeks (23.3%), respectively. Infection/necrosis (37.2%) and self-mutilation (20.9%) were the most observed post-operative complications by respondents. Most practices (72.0%) performed tail docking without anaesthesia while 60.5% of practices never gave post-operative analgesic. Majority of respondents (72.0%) oppose abrogation of docking for non-therapeutic reasons. Primary legislation prohibiting docking of dogs' tails except for medical or surgical reasons is recommended.

**Key words:** Tail docking, dogs, southwest Nigeria.

## INTRODUCTION

The World Small Animal Veterinary Association (WSAVA) defines tail docking as "the amputation of a dog's tail at varying lengths to suit the recommendations of a breed standard" (WSAVA, 2001).

The amputation of the puppy's tail is usually performed either with scissors, a knife or with a rubber band at between three to five days of age. Since docking involves interference with the sensitive tissues and bone structures of the animal, it is considered an act of mutilation by WSAVA, comparable to ear cropping and other non-therapeutic procedure inflicted on dogs.

Tail docking of dogs is justified on the basis that it prevents tail injury, particularly in working dogs such as:

Spaniels, Terriers and Old English sheepdogs in the United Kingdom. This stance is maintained by breed clubs (Warman, 2004) and hunters alike (Dyer, 2004). Reports abound to the effect that complications from docking procedure contribute to the incidence of tail injuries (Diesel et al., 2010), acquired urinary/faecal incontinence and perineal hernia (Wansbrough, 1996), impaired locomotion (Bennett and Perini, 2004) and amputation neuromas (Gross and Carr, 1990). The controversy over whether tail docking and ear cropping on companion dogs should be made unlawful originated in 19th century in Britain (Delafenetre, 2009). Since then, the controversy has remained unabated as evidenced by

the number of correspondence (Davidson, 2006; King, 2007; Penny, 2007) and submissions received by Parliament in the drafting of the Animal Welfare Bill (Willeberg, 1996; Defra, 2002).

Different groups hold strong views about tail docking in domestic dogs. These range from veterinary associations and welfare organizations, which typically want the practice banned, to purebred dog associations and Kennel clubs, which vigorously oppose the anti-docking legislation.

In the 1980s, the veterinarians eventually joined forces with animal protection organizations to press for a ban against non-therapeutic tail docking in dogs (Ryder, 2000). The debate has centered on whether non-therapeutic tail docking reduces the risk of tail injuries sufficiently to justify the ethical concerns regarding this prophylactic intervention (Diesel et al., 2010). Today, opposition to tail docking in dogs for non-therapeutic reasons has heightened in countries like the United Kingdom (UK), United States of America (USA) and Canada. Many countries such as the European Union, Australia and South Africa have gone to the extent of outright ban on what they described as an archaic, barbaric and pointless act (AWVT, 2002). Tail docking has thus become a very emotive subject in many countries. Many organized bodies such as the kennel clubs of the UK and the USA and the Council of Docked Breeds (CDB) consider that docking is in the interest of the animal's welfare. This is in sharp contrast to the views held by the European Convention for the Protection of Pet Animals (ECPA), The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, The British and Scottish Societies for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and the Advocates of Animals among others (AWVT, 2002).

To the best of the author's knowledge, report on the practice and legislation on tail docking in dogs in Nigeria has not been documented. In recent times, importation of exotic breeds of dogs by breeders into Nigeria has heightened due to increased demand and preference for dogs to meet security challenges. With pedigree and pure breeds being the preference, Nigeria will most likely be drawn into the docking controversy in not too distant future. An objective evaluation of the tail docking issue requires the integration of moral views with biological and behavioral facts. There is therefore the need for tail docking by vet practices and breeders in Nigeria to be evaluated with regard to current practices, ethical and welfare issues in line with standard practices. These are the objectives which the present study sought to achieve.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was conducted between January and June, 2013 in two stages. In stage one, data were obtained through the administration of a questionnaire to clients who are dog breeders/owners that

visited some selected private and state owned veterinary clinics/hospitals. The clinics/hospitals were drawn from Oyo, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, Ekiti and Lagos states of Southwest Nigeria. The areas surveyed has the highest concentration of small animal practices and over 50% of the exotic dog population in Nigeria. Respondents' were asked to freely provide answers to open questions on tail docking with respects to their years of experience as a dog breeders/owners, the breeds of dogs kept and commonly docked, why, where, when and who performed the tail docking. Information on post docking observation and complications were also obtained. Respondents' opinion on their awareness of the existence of and support for legislation against tail docking in Nigeria was also sought. All responses were freely given in written form, collated and stratified appropriately.

The second stage of the study involved a retrospective evaluation of the practice, ethics and welfare use of tail docking by practices in the study locations, over a five year period (2008 to 2012). Information on breeds, age at docking, indication for surgery, anaesthetic protocol, operative techniques and postoperative care were obtained for all documented tail docking procedure.

## Data analysis

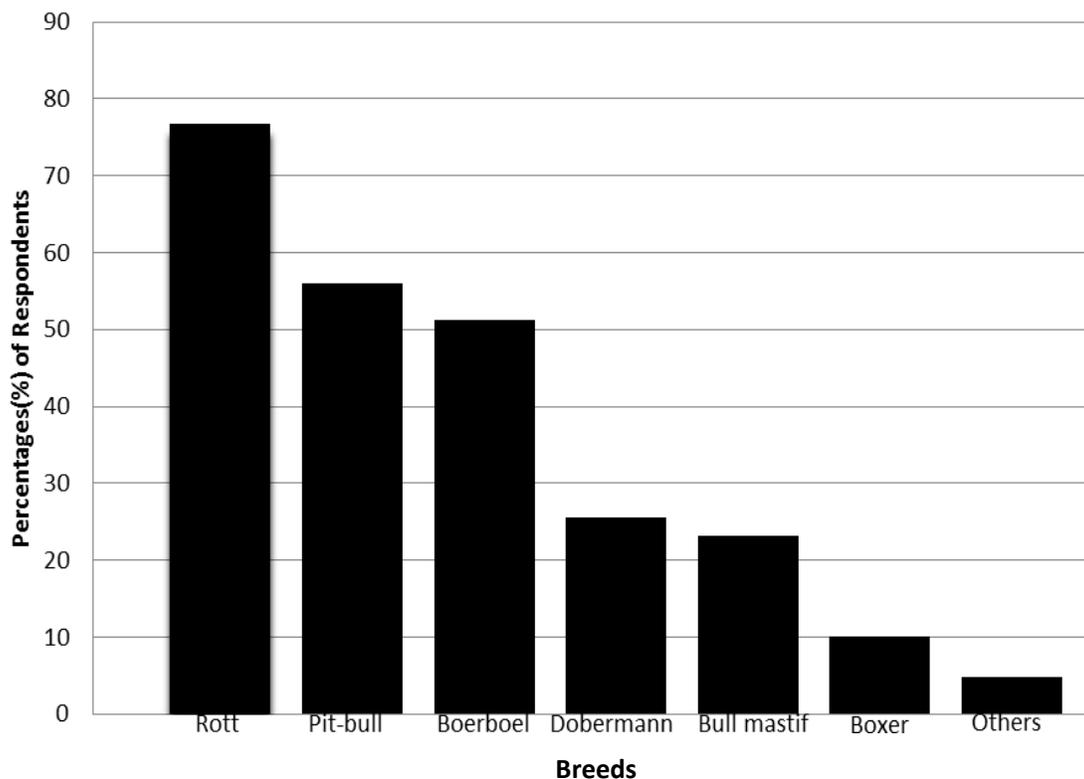
The data obtained in both stages of study were collated and subjected to appropriate descriptive statistical analysis.

## RESULTS

Of the total number of 64 practices in private and public sectors listed for the study based on their scope of activities and type of practice, only 43 (67%) gave their consent to co-operate and facilitate the activity. Out of the 270 questionnaires sent out, 168 (62.2%) respondents were collected. Breeds of dogs most commonly docked at the study location included Rottweiler (76.7%), Pit-bull (56.0%), Boerboel (51.2%), Dobermann (25.6%), Bull-mastif (23.2%), Boxer (10.1%) and others (4.8%) (Figure 1). The reasons for tail docking from breeders and veterinary practices' viewpoints are presented in Figure 2. Significant number of breeders docked for reasons of custom/tradition (74.4%) while others did so to improve appearance (53.6%), convenience and pleasure (46.4%), better hygiene (28.0%), ease of mating (14.2%), enhanced ease of aggression (7.1%) and prevention of injuries (7.1%). Clinical records by practices on the other hand revealed that 97.7 and 2.3% were docked for elective and therapeutic purposes, respectively.

The age at docking varied from less than 2 weeks to above 8 weeks. Majority of respondents (65.1%) docked at 2 to 3 weeks of age while 11.6, 4.7 and 4.7% docked at less than 2 weeks, 4 to 8 weeks and above 8 weeks, respectively (Figure 3).

Infection/necrosis of the tail constituted the most frequently observed post-docking complication by respondents (36.9%). Other complications observed in decreasing order of frequency included self-mutilation (20.2%), increased aggression (8.3%), attack by other



**Figure 1.** Breeds of dogs commonly docked by respondents in Southwest Nigeria.

dogs (5.4%), nervous signs (2.8%) and increased tendency to sleep (1.8%) (Figure 4).

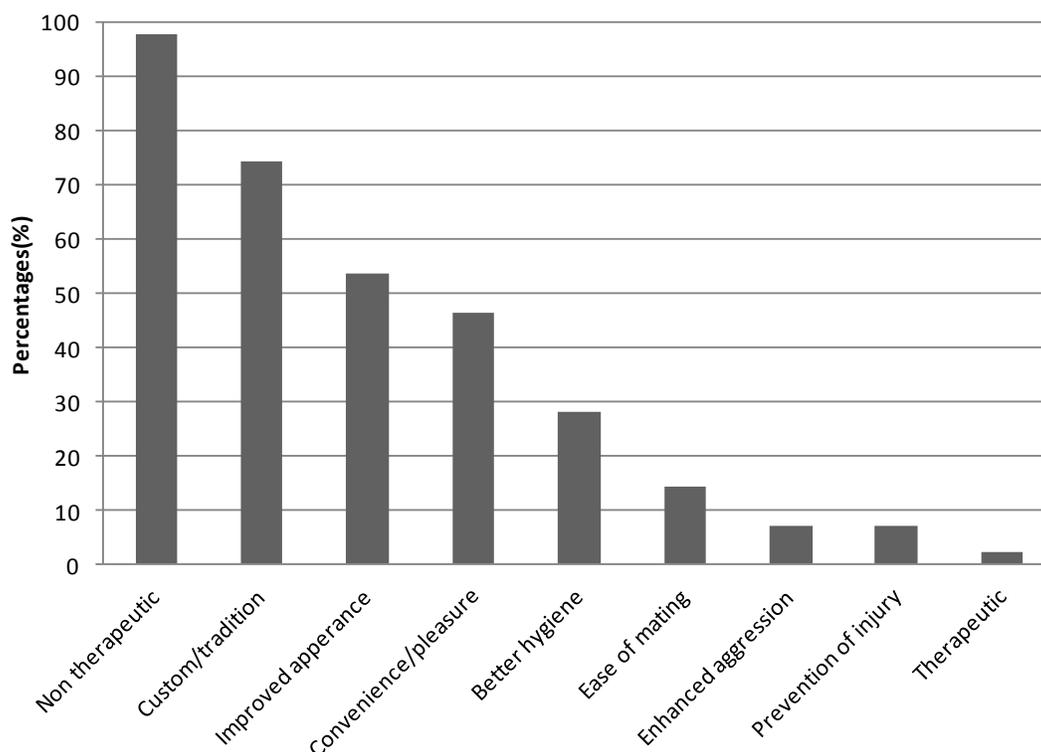
Anaesthetic and surgical techniques employed by practices for tail docking are presented in Figure 5. Manual restraints and anaesthesia were employed by 72.0 and 28.0% of practices, respectively for tail docking while 60.5% of practices gave no analgesics post-operatively. The use of tourniquet to minimize blood loss was embraced by 81.4% of practices. Majority of practices (90.6%) docked at the level of the second coccygeal vertebral while others docked at the third (11.6%) and fourth (4.7%) coccygeal vertebral bones, respectively. The attitude of respondents to abrogation of tail docking for non-therapeutic reasons indicated that 10.7% are favourably disposed to such proposal while significant number (72.0%) are opposed to it, with 17.2% being indifferent to such procedure.

## DISCUSSION

Expectedly, the results of this investigation have shown that the practice of tail docking in dogs is embraced by veterinary practices and breeders/pet owners in the study location, in line with the practice in most parts of the

world (Morton, 1992). Rottweiler was the most commonly docked breed. Other breeds such as Boerboel, Pitbull, Dobermann, Bull mastiff and Boxers are docked with less frequency. It is worthy to note that all the breeds reported in this study are pedigree dogs that are customarily docked in their various places of origin. It is therefore not surprising that most respondents reported in this study docked for reason of custom or tradition and to a less extent for other reasons such as improved appearance, convenience and better hygiene. This is in agreement with findings from previous studies in the UK and Australia (Wansbrough, 1996; Bennett and Perini, 2003).

Findings from clinical records in this study also corroborated breeders/owners views to the effect that significant number of tail docking procedures in dogs were performed for non-therapeutic reasons. The docking of dog's tails is a practice which has been carried out for centuries in puppies between 5 to 10 days old because of the notion that neonates are less able to perceive pain at that age. This general belief has been proven not to be correct (Noonan et al., 1996). It was observed from the study that docking was done much later in life (2 to 3 weeks) in 65.1% of cases, without the use of anaesthetic and analgesics in 72.0 and 60.5%, respectively. This in the author's opinion is not in accordance with the current



**Figure 2.** Reasons for tail docking from Breeders and Clinicians' view points.

knowledge and practices regarding pain management in dogs with docked tails (AWVT, 2002). Similarly, comparative detailed studies of pain caused by different methods of tail docking in young farm animals (Moloney and Kent, 1997) and puppies (Noonan et al., 1996) reported that these animals feel pain when tail-docked.

The use of manual restraint by most practices and non-administration of analgesics by 40% of practices post-operation in this study suggest that appropriate consideration was not accorded to the welfare of dogs with respect to alleviation of pain during and after docking, as required by standard and best practices (Miles, 2005; Lefebvre et al., 2007).

The ECPPA signed by twelve countries prohibits surgical operations in which an animal will or is likely to experience severe pain (Lefebvre et al., 2007). Similarly, the Companion Animal Welfare Council (CAWC) and the Societies for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in the UK and Australia are opposed to docking on the basis of the pain associated with the procedure (AWVT, 2002).

In this study, some respondents observed an increased tendency of docked puppies to suckle and fall asleep within few minutes of tail docking. This may be an indication of pain, as the act of suckling has been reported to stimulate the release of endogenous opioids

(endorphins) that produce analgesia (Bennett and Perini, 2003). Observation of infection/necrosis and self-mutilation by 37.2 and 20.9% of respondents respectively post-docking may suggest poor pain management on the part of the clinician and more importantly, inadequate post-operative care by dog owners who most frequently fail to honour follow-up appointments. It was also revealed from this study that docking was performed by veterinarians and non veterinarians alike. Detailed records of the procedure were not fully documented by most practices largely due to failure on the part of client to honour postoperative appointments.

Expectedly, the attitude of respondents to abrogation of tail docking for non-therapeutic purposes was unfavorable. A significant percentage of respondents consider docking as a harmless procedure that upholds the integrity of certain dog breeds as exemplified by Rottweiler, Boerboel and Dobermann in this study. At present, the level of awareness on welfare and legislation issues regarding tail docking in Nigeria is poor. Across a range of countries, routine tail docking is considered unacceptable to most veterinarians (83 to 92%) and the general public (68 to 88%), (Bennett and Perini, 2003). In contrast, many breeders with a prior commitment to this practice remain in favor of tail docking (CDB, 2007).

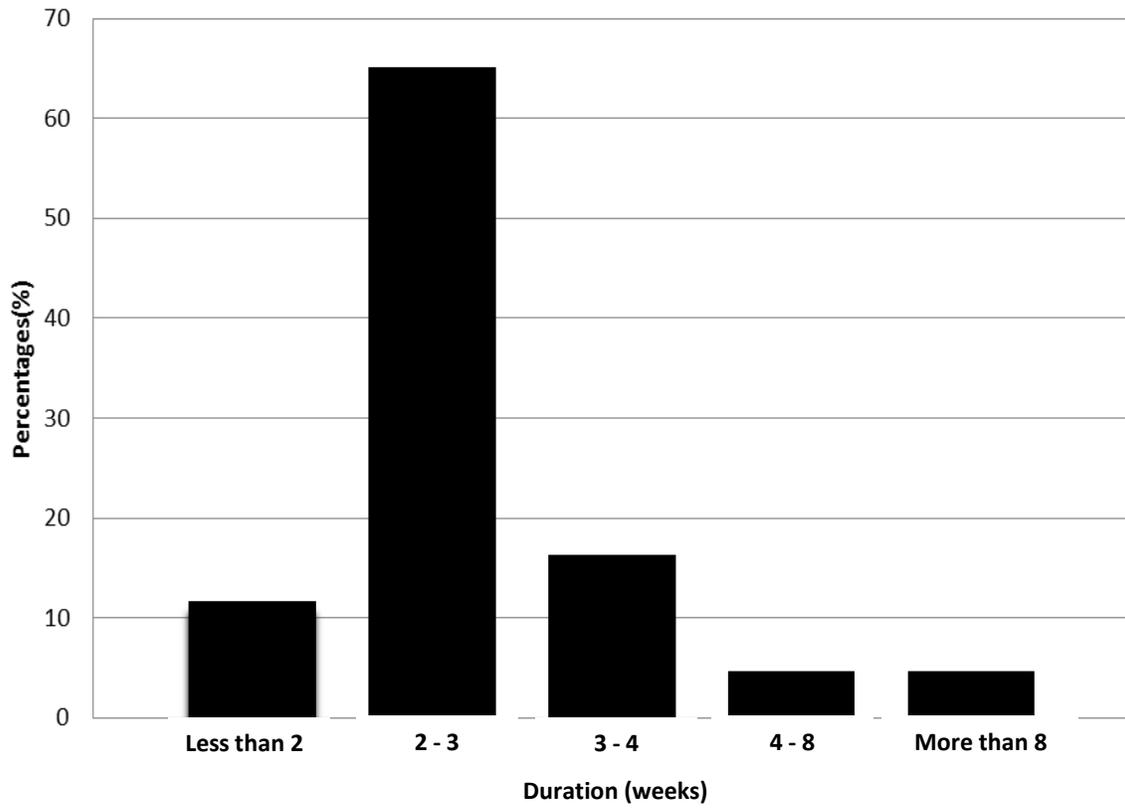


Figure 3. Age at which docking is done according to respondents.

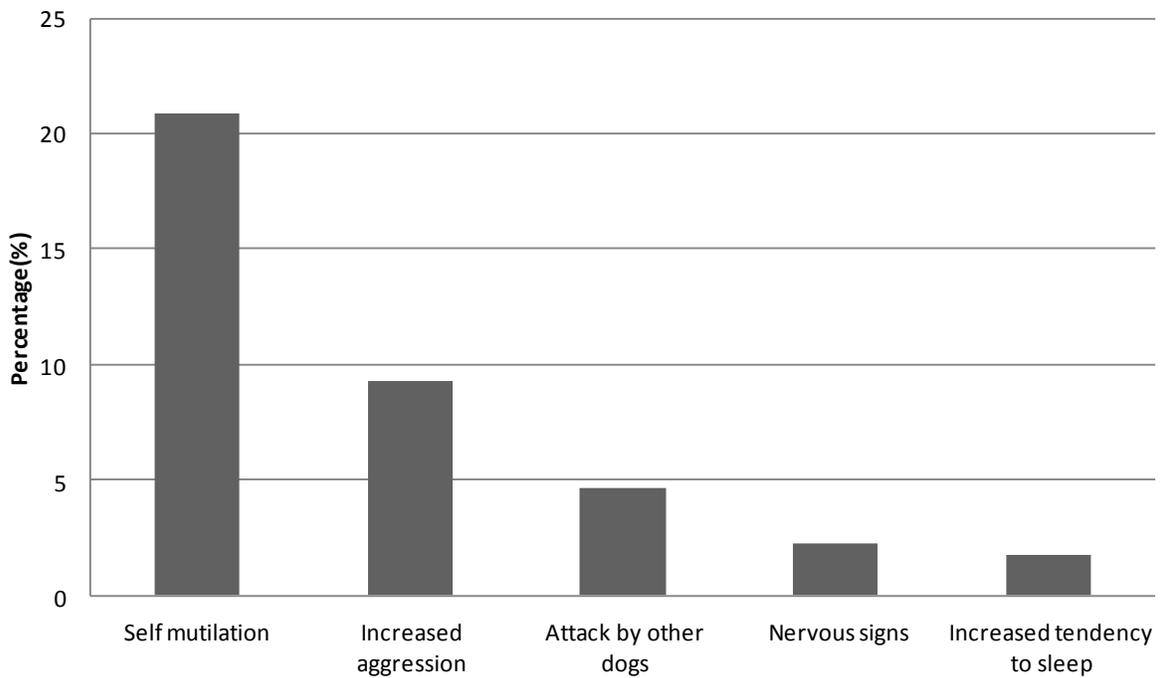
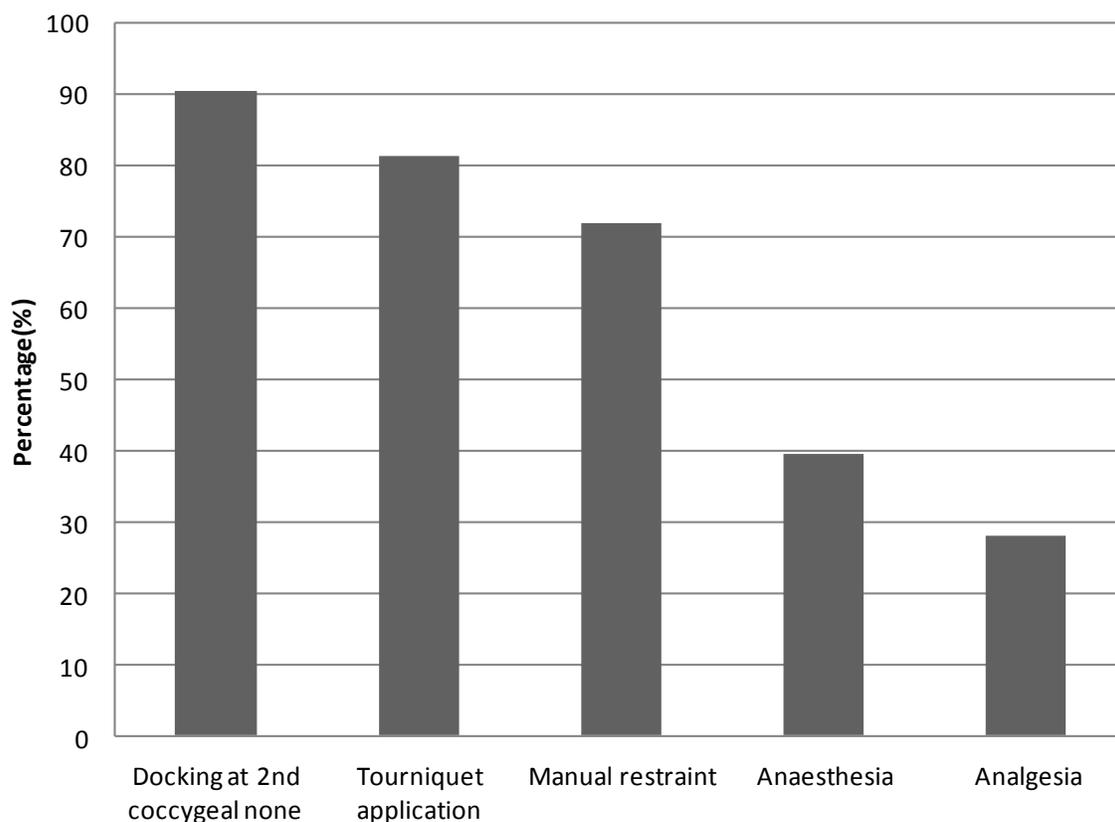


Figure 4. Post-docking complications observed by respondents.



**Figure 5.** Anaesthetic and operative techniques employed by practices for tail docking.

Unlike in Nigeria which is yet to have a policy on tail docking in dogs, the procedure is not permitted or is highly restricted in many countries of the world.

The European Convention for the Protection of Pet Animals (ECPA) prohibits surgical operations for non-curative purposes. An increasing number of countries have placed restrictions on canine tail docking including the UK, the USA, Germany, Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands, Australia, Finland and Denmark while others including Greece, Luxembourg, Switzerland and Austria have ratified the ECPA Convention.

The outcome of this study suggests that an enactment of a law banning tail docking on welfare ground maybe inevitable in the near future in Nigeria. This will be in line with current trends in many parts of the world, like the European Union, Australia, South Africa and Israel (AWVT, 2002). It is the opinion of the author that tail docking cannot be described as prophylactic if it is undertaken merely on request, or just because the dog is of a particular breed, type or conformation, as reported in this study. The Veterinary Council of Nigeria as a regulatory body has legal and ethical duty to its members, to the animals under their care and to the

general public, including breeders/pet owners, to ensure that the standard of the profession are maintained. It is highly imperative that surgical operations for the purpose of modifying the appearance of a pet animal for therapeutic and/or non-curative purposes must be performed by a veterinary surgeon. Operations including tail docking, in which the animal will or is likely to experience pain should be carried out under anaesthesia with appropriate analgesia. Primary legislation prohibiting docking of dogs' tails in Nigeria except for medical or surgical reasons is recommended.

It is important to be aware of the limitations of the present study. The numbers of veterinary practices selected in each states of the region sampled were not selected based on the probability to the size and scope of activity. A very high proportion of practices included in the study were based in the state capitals. The sample may be un-representative because not all cases of tail docking were documented by practices. Additionally, low response rate on the part of breeders/owners created a reduction in anticipated sample size. This may be due to low level of awareness on the issue of tail docking in Nigeria.

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