

LIFE&TIMES **FAMILY**

Eye on animal abusers

Proposed new legislation aims to promote responsible pet ownership, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

ONE thing's for sure — after watching Oprah Winfrey's show on the horrors of puppy mills, you'll avoid backyard breeders. You telephone the pet shelter and one of the first questions you're asked is, "Do you live in an apartment?"

Your "yes" results in a refusal to let you adopt an animal because the shelter's full of pets abandoned by apartment-dwellers.

But you still want a pet. So, off you go to the pet shop and buy a kitten called Jack. Three months later, a friend informs you that Jack did in fact come from a kitty mill.

"The basic thing here is that because pet shops are selling kittens and puppies, this practice has given rise to backyard breeders and puppy mills," says veterinarian Dr Clement Anthony. "Instead of stopping them, the authorities should register the pet shops and monitor them."

These are precisely what some of the provisions of the Animal Welfare Bill 2012 will cover, says director of the Department of Veterinary Services, Datuk Dr Quaza Nizamuddin Hassan Nizam, 52. "Don't get confused," he adds. "The Animal Act 1963 deals mainly with disease control. The Animal Welfare Bill 2012, however, takes into account the welfare of animals and promotes responsible pet ownership."

According to Quaza, animal welfare will include ensuring that animals are housed in a suitable environment, fed a suitable diet, exhibit normal behaviour patterns and are protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease. Furthermore, all pet shop owners and groomers will be regulated.

What does this mean in real terms? "It means that when you next visit a pet shop," explains Clement, "you must ensure that this pet shop has met all the basic requirements."

One such requirement he would like to see put in place is that each pet shop must employ a veterinary nurse to monitor the health of the animals under their care.

"Similar to human nurses," he explains, "veterinary nurses are those well-versed in the health of animals. If the dog has diarrhoea, for instance, the veterinary nurse will be able to provide the right kind of history to the vet when required."

As for breeders, there is one irksome issue which the vet hopes will



No one will be able to get away with animal cruelty, says Quaza.

be solved when the Animal Welfare Bill is passed into law.

"Right now, there is no regulation of breeders. And many see a dog producing puppies as a form of making money. Take one dog and say it whelps twice in a year. That dog has produced approximately 12 puppies. Now, if each puppy is sold at RM1,000, the breeder has made RM12,000. Why are these backyard breeders not paying income tax?"

Clement feels that once breeders are registered, it might deter unscrupulous people from practising indiscriminate breeding techniques.

"Together with the pet passport," Clement quickly adds, "remember that we'll have a database of how many pets there are in each house. So, if you have two to three cats of mixed sex and they are not neutered, you're technically a breeder."

It is the enforcement of these regulations that annoy people like Shenaaz Khan, 37, president of the Malaysian Animal Welfare Society.

"We've had a law to prohibit cruelty to animals for close to 50 years now and very few people are punished. It's



The Animal Welfare Bill 2012 aims to promote responsible pet ownership, among other things.

the councils who are the biggest culprits. They shoot stray dogs instead of tranquilising them first. Then you have officers seizing abused dogs and keeping them in pounds. When the owner arrives, they'll counsel him and return the animal to him."

Shaking her head, she asks: "Would you return an abused child to his abuser? No. So, why would you return an abused animal to its owner?"

She insists: "When it was a RM200 fine, people used to pay the fine and that's it. Now, they'll get lawyers. I wonder if they're ready? Will they have the forensic know-how? Will their investigation papers be in order? I've heard judges say, 'It's just an animal!'"

Smiling, she says that her mother would be furious to hear this. "My mother doesn't allow us to call the cats animals. They're part of the family."

Quaza asserts that the laws are being enforced. "We do have experts and we do prosecute."

He cites a recent case where, with the help of the AG's Chambers, the punishment received for a crime of cruelty to cats was increased from a fine to a custodial sentence.

Furthermore, under the legislation, not only is the fine increased from RM200 to a sum not less than RM20,000, what is considered cruel has been broadened to include action such as mutilating an animal, cropping its ears, defanging it or debark-

ingadog.

This will sit well with C
"I know of vets who do it, but I am absolutely against devocalising an animal."

He then tells the story of a woman who came to see him. "She has a miniature dachshund. Her neighbour once said to her, 'Your dog barks.' She was tempted to ask her neighbour, 'What do you expect? It's a dog. Do you want it to talk to you in English?' Instead, she was horrified when the neighbour insisted she take her dog to a vet to have its vocal chords cut. I mean, dogs bark. Cats meow. Noise is relative."

Shrugging his shoulders, he adds: "Music can be noise. Animals can be trained not to make noise. In fact, they're much more trainable than humans."

Shenaaz says: "I think that telling someone to get rid of a family pet is an infringement upon a person's right to keep a pet. As for noise, the same neighbour who complains about your dog barking or the cat meowing will not bother to ask you when he's doing renovations to his house."

"The mindset of people will only change when definitions change. Animals are still considered as goods or commodities," says Shenaaz.

"At present, the councils have no right to take your pet away or treat it in a cruel manner. At best, the Resident's Association can make your life miserable. To remove a pet from your home, they will need a court order, which will mean getting genuine proof that your pet, which includes cats and any other animal you keep, is a nuisance or health hazard."

To that, Quaza has the last say because under the Animal Welfare Bill, everyone, including council officers, will be subjected to the provisions of the law. The way he sees it, no one in Malaysia will ever get away with being cruel to an animal again.