

Title: Management of common osteopathies among military dogs in the south African national defence force

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Text: Military dogs are specialised working dogs that start their working career very young in life through socialisation and training for their specialized field in a military training facility. Detection dogs, patrol dogs and guard dogs each have unique duties that affect their bodies in different ways.

Dogs trained for detection duties require a strong focus and a good sense of smell. Dogs trained as guard dogs need to be strong, alert and fearless, the ability to act on their own without a handler present is crucial. Patrol dogs have the most physical requirements as they need fitness and drive to cover long distances and rough terrain. Sound bones and joints are crucial to all working dogs.

The strain on the dogs skeletal system is often countered by using only the best breeding stock as working animals, but some osteopathies persist despite good breeding. Breeds utilised by the South African national defence force include: Rottweilers, German shepherds, Belgian shepherds, Dutch Shepherds and Labrador retrievers.

Rottweilers are utilised mainly as guard dogs for their large size and strength. German, Belgian and Dutch shepherds are utilised most commonly as patrol dogs for their intelligence and fitness.

Labrador Retrievers along with German, Belgian and Dutch Shepherds can all be utilised as detection dogs if they show aptitude as puppies.

Common osteopathies in young fast growing dogs include: hypertrophic osteodystrophy, growth plate fractures and miscellaneous fractures due to the physical nature of the military.

Among adults the strain of heavy patrols often manifests as hip dysplasia, degenerate joint disease, arthritis and bone reformation secondary to ligament or tendon injury and strain.

Signs of osteopathies include lameness, pain, swelling, depression and fever. Conditions such as hypertrophic osteodystrophy in puppies can be paired with concurrent pneumonia in more severe cases. Radiography is used to confirm diagnoses when physical examination and clinical signs are suspicious for an underlying osteopathy.

Management of specific conditions is done through diet, anti-inflammatory treatment, regular monitoring, exercise and physiotherapy. Recognising these conditions at an early stage can greatly improve the management prognosis and improve the quality of life of the animal.

Osteopathies are very common in working dogs and one of the main reasons for disposal or euthanasia. Correct management and prevention of these conditions at an early stage is key to successful working animals that have the best quality of life we can give them.

Key words: Osteopathy, prevention, management, working dogs, military dogs