

Cervical Vertebrae, Middle Ear, Brain Stem Injuries Caused by Improperly Used Control Devices

By Nancy Evans

(From Newsletter of the Pasanita Obedience Club)

Having recently been presented with several severe injuries resulting from dogs being led"?" or perhaps leading their owners in Haiti TM or Gentle LeaderTM head gear, I would like to make a few comments. These devices are designed to function on a dog, in the manner that a halter functions on a horse. They provide control of the head and some lateral stability for the dog that bolts 90 to the owner or handler. By theory and design, a gentle tension brings the nose around the dog "gently" circles back into "heel" position.

In reality these devices are appropriate for use on the obedient dog that never becomes excited, never tries to break loose or run at, over, or after another dog. It is virtually impossible for the amateur owner/trainer/handler to control a dog without jerking his head in the opposite direction from which his body is traveling. It is also impossible to pull hard enough to stop the dog intent on mischief-without cutting the skin under his ears, or worse damaging the skull structures that protect the middle and inner ear, and brain stem. The result of this could be Vestibular syndrome, a neurological injury to the nerves of the inner ear that control the balance mechanism of the animal, damage to the spinal cord, and dislocation, perhaps fracture, of the cervical vertebrae.

I believe that the purpose of the halter has been misinterpreted to or by the user. A horse is a big animal with a strong neck. His seven cervical vertebrae are stabilized by muscles, tendons, and ligaments appropriate to his size and strength. A man (or woman at 130 to 200 pounds is folly to the 1000 to 2000 pound horse. If the horse wants to leave, he leaves. Strength-wise there is little or nothing that the handler can do to alter his behavior. Horses are trained to obey our commands and conform to our wants and wishes. This has little to do with intimidation, infliction of pain, or application of strength. It has a lot to do with respect and maybe love.

A dog has a relatively weak neck. His seven cervical vertebrae are stabilized by muscles, tendons, and ligaments appropriate to his size and strength. The dog at 15, or 50, or even 100 pounds cannot withstand even one yank from a 130 to 200 pound human without probably injury. Both Haiti and Gentle Leader warn against such yanks, but what are you to do when your beloved pet is seriously out of control? My suggestion is traditional training---obedience training-with a standard around the neck collar or choke chain collar. If your dog cannot heel, sit, stay (at a leash distance), and come on command, your dog has no business being in a public place!

When we get into real trouble with the Haiti and Gentle Leader is with the "bull" breeds who have short necks, significant strength to withstand yanking from any direction, and an exuberant nature that defies control. The dog merely tows the owner around at leash length, often with his head cocked away from the direction of movement. Here we see severe lacerations from the narrow straps and/or buckles that cut into the base of the ears. With enough pressure, these straps pass under the skull to damage the structures that protect the middle, inner ear, and brain stem, damaging these structures, or disturbing the alignment of the Occiput (base of the skull) and the first two cervical vertebrae.

These accidents and severe injuries will continue until owners realize that dogs need to be trained not to pull and bolt. The aforementioned devices are not designed to perform that task. When behaviorists develop monkeys into dog trainers - a 5 pound monkey and a 50 pound dog is about the correct ratio - then the monkey can train the dogs like a horse, using the same directional vectors and strengths required by the Halti and Gentle Leader to correct these training problems. Until that time, let's go back to traditional methods and hard work. Let's try respect---on both sides of the equation. There are no shortcuts. There are no bad dogs --just dogs that need to be taught respect.

WARNING

I hear that persons with assistance dogs are using the halter devices as tow ropes for wheelchairs. Allowing your dog to pull you isn't a bad idea; the choice of equipment is deplorable. Pulling animals-horses, oxen, reindeer, sled dogs-do not pull loads with their heads or necks. They push with their shoulders. A harness affixed around their middle with a strap around the chest allows the animal to push his body weight into the harness and pull behind him, whatever is attached to the harness. To "drive" a dog, you don't need to hang onto his head; most assistance dogs need little more than voice control. The law requires that you have a leash, but a leash on a harness is legal. Buy a harness, attach a substantial leash to the harness, and let you wonderful and expensive dog push you with his body instead of dragging you with his precious head, attached to a beautiful and fragile neck. The medical problems (including paralysis) that can occur from injury to the cervical vertebrae are difficult and expensive to treat. Some dogs never recover.

This same warning goes out to those individuals that encourage dogs to tow them on skates, skis, sleds, bicycles, in wagons, etc. Buy a harness. It is a cheap investment that prevents unthinkable injuries to your dog.

Nancy Evans

NOTE FROM RON: I assume that Nancy Evans is a veterinary assistant in the office of Megan Bamford, D.V.M. While a harness is useful for tracking and carting, it can get owners (especially of large dogs) in trouble if the dog is not completely under control. The Presa Canario that killed Diane Whipple was on a harness. I doubt if Marjorie Knoller could have controlled the dog if it were wearing a collar, but she would have had more control of the head and teeth than with a harness. If you are in a dog park and your dog is running on a harness, you are asking for trouble. It is not a control device. It is a device to allow a dog to pull in front of you.

My American Bulldog, Boo, a rescue, was treated by Nancy Evans and Dr. Megan Bamford, D.V.M. with a combination of acupuncture, homeopathic and western medicines for a vestibular injury caused by my misuse of the gentle leader. He thankfully made a full recovery, but the manifestations of the trauma were frightening. As wonderfully reassuring as Ms. Evans and Dr. Bamford were, no one could convince me that Boo would survive the devastating injuries he appeared to have sustained. My extremely active, athletic dog stopped functioning. He was unable to stand or walk and would even throw up water until he stopped eating and drinking altogether. He seemed to be partially paralyzed and when we would try to hold him up he would twist himself into a limp donut. We were soon to learn that his world was spinning wildly twenty-four hours a day.

I have two pit bulls along with Boo. 'Pullitis' is a common affliction in our household. Pinky and Ni Ni had slowly been trained out of their pulling ways. Boo was my hard-headed hold out.

The occasion was the Southern California Pet Expo. My dogs love going to this type of event because they are sponges for the attention that is lavished on them by the huge crowd of pet lovers. I decided to take Pinky and Boo but knew that getting my two dogs the considerable distance from the car to the booth by myself would be the biggest challenge of the day. Pinky wore a regular collar, but for the more powerful Boo I decided to use a gentle leader. I planned to remove it as soon as we reached our club's booth-a booth which, ironically, was there to promote obedience training. I must add that our club has never promoted head halters a training tool, believing that no device can substitute for good training.

At the Expo, Boo was so eager to meet the other dogs as we waded through the crowd that he pulled me the entire distance to the booth while wearing his gentle leader. He pulled his body away from me, with his head cocked towards me by the gentle leader. Although I knew better than to jerk a dog wearing a head halter, I was unaware that as he was applying steady pressure, in essence, pulling away from the halter, a massive injury was being silently inflicted. All I could think was it would all be over as soon as we made it to the booth. By the time we reached the booth and I had removed the gentle leader, I had a vague sense that something was not quite right with Boo. I would not attribute his strangely laconic behavior to the halter till much later.

By the following morning, it was obvious that there was something frighteningly wrong. Boo struggled to keep his footing, his right side weaker than his left and his paws kept rolling under him as he tried to walk. My first thought was that he'd been poisoned, but he lives indoors. Then it began to dawn on me. Had I injured him with the gentle leader? I raced to my chiropractor, who was able to adjust his severely subluxated axis and atlas vertebrae. He was astonished by the degree of subluxation. I then raced to the vet who horrified me with his speculations on what was amiss. He said it could be any of the following: a brain tumor, severe cervical damage, or inner ear injury. He suggested I come back first thing the following morning for a battery of tests, including X-rays, MRI's, and possibly major surgery. By now I was becoming convinced that I had caused his condition. I tried to explain about the head halter. He seemed skeptical. Dazed and in absolute despair, I gathered up Boo and left. My vet was no doubt right to want to explore all possibilities, but by now I was absolutely certain that whatever was wrong with Boo had been caused by the gentle leader.

Overnight, Boo got progressively worse. He couldn't walk and was unable to keep food or water down. By the next morning he had stopped eating and drinking altogether. The next morning Nancy Evans and Dr. Megan Bamford came to my rescue, squeezing us into their extremely busy schedule. Both accomplished horsewomen, when they heard me hysterically babbling something about a head halter for dogs, they immediately suspected vestibular injury, something more common in horses than dogs. The vestibular nerve controls equilibrium. My despair became cautious relief when not only did they know what was wrong with him, but they assured me that he would recover. Apparently, when Boo pulled continuously in one direction in the head halter against my restraint, the back strap of the halter dug into the bones at the base of the skull, behind his ears, crushing them and injuring the nerve. In addition, the angle that the head halter forced his neck to hold had severely subluxated cervical vertebrae 1 and 2. Over the next several weeks, Boo manifested a frightening array of vestibular injury symptoms. All he could do was lie on his side, and even then he went through strange convulsions, apparently losing his balance even though he was lying on the ground. We had to carry him everywhere (this is a 90 lb.dog). He developed a severe head tilt. He lost over 20 pounds. Sadly, I found out that most dogs with vestibular trauma are unnecessarily euthanized, mostly because it is so difficult to diagnose and the symptoms appear so devastating. However, it turns out that with the correct diagnosis and treatment these dogs can make a full recovery. During the excruciating weeks that followed, Ms. Evans and Dr. Bamford skillfully controlled the inflammation of the damaged nerve and expedited his recovery with acupuncture, western medicine, homeopathic medicine and chiropractic. To me they are saints.

I am sure head halters appeal to people like me who have strong, bull-headed dogs. But these are probably exactly the dogs that are the most likely to be injured when using these devices. Perhaps experts can safely train a dog in a head halter, but most of us are not experts. And unless we are willing and able to let go of the leash when our dog decides to defy our best efforts to safely control him/her while in a head harness, restraining him/her in this device places our dog in danger of severe injury.

That Boo recovered seems like a miracle to me. This was a dog so injured that I agonized about the possibility of having to put him down, or watch him die. And to make matters worse, I had caused the injury. And yet, within six months of the injury, my sweet rambunctious Boo was nearly symptom free. He is still somewhat more cautious when he plays, the price he will probably forever pay for my inadvertent carelessness. I cringe whenever I see a dog in a head harness. No doubt the owner loves his/her dog as much as I love mine, but like I once did, the owner believes the device is perfectly safe. I will probably never again risk attaching a leash to anything around Boo's neck. Boo now trains and takes walks in a harness. Most importantly, I am training myself to learn the most important lesson that there are absolutely no devices that substitute for the hard work, patience and love that is required to train our beloved canine companions.

Linda Mann

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