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Neophilia in successfully ageing dogs - preliminary results

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Introduction

Engagement by novelty and higher cognitive performance in old age appears connected in humans (Daffner et al., 2007). Based on previous results (Kaulfuß & Mills, 2008) dogs are attracted towards novel objects over familiar ones. Using a simple setup, we investigated whether this phenomenon is also observable in senior dogs.

Material and Methods

We tested N=44 dogs over 8 years of age, free from overt medical conditions and sensory impairment. During a one-minute long presentation phase, dogs were encouraged to investigate two identical objects. Afterwards, they left the room for a short break, during which one of the objects was switched for a novel one. Upon returning for the test phase, dogs were released without any specific command, and the dogs' first contact with the objects was coded.

Results

28 dogs manipulated at least one of the objects during this phase (the remaining dogs were passive/oriented toward the humans). Dogs contacted the novel object sooner than the familiar object (Wilcoxon signed-rank test: $z=-2.197$, $p<0.05$).

Conclusion

The results show that neophilia, even after a very brief presentation and a short break is detectable in normally ageing dogs. Our simple protocol could be included in the evaluation of cognitive state of dogs in the veterinary praxis, as even multiple trials can be carried out within minutes and the test does not require any pre-training. Future studies will determine whether the loss of ability to detect novel objects may be an indication of pathological cognitive decline in senior dogs, as it is in humans.

References:

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