

happening now,” said Dr Black.

The idea of introducing microchip identification to Australia came about in the 1980s by Dr Black and his veterinary colleagues Dr Rick Walduck and Dr David Madill after Dr Madill returned from a veterinary conference in Hawaii. The microchips they learned about were designed for identifying valuable zoo species, but the three Aussie vets thought it could be used as a permanent identification for companion animals.

“In those days, when we found a stray, we would put notices up and contact the council, hoping that someone will contact us. It was a disaster,” said Dr Black. “We thought if we can have one chip, one reader and one register, it would make it easier for people to be reunited with their pets.”

CAR and AAR launched around the same time in 1989. AAR – a division of the Royal Agriculture Society of NSW (RAS) – is the largest not-for-profit and most comprehensive animal registration and recovery service in Australasia, maintaining records for 2.6 million animals across Australia and New Zealand, including zoo animals.

It took many years for the concept of microchipping to be accepted as councils and vets slowly took up readers, microchipping was promoted to pet owners and state governments finally began legislating for compulsory microchipping.

What also contributed to the chip being an accepted part of responsible pet ownership is pets started playing a more important role in the family, explained Donna Cotter, manager of AAR.

“People spend so much money on their pets – accessories, grooming, pet hotels, pet sitters and dog walkers – it all evolved over the years. People now have become more conscious of their animal being a part of the family and don’t want to lose it,” she said.

Ms Cotter wants to see laws that puts everyone – councils, national registries, state government registries – all on the same page in accessing microchip records for the retrieval of the animal to find the right owner.



All of the companion animal microchip registries in Australia are linked to Pet Address (except for the NSW Government’s pet registry),

“Also, a registry is as good as the data given,” she said. “So often we get change of ownerships and the previous owner hasn’t signed the request. We have to write to the previous owner and chase up their approval.”

Ms Cotter said the majority of pet owners and breeders are responsible, but more education is needed to make the microchipping system work well.

“The responsibility for educating pet owners about microchipping and registration lies with the seller or the source of the animal; to start pet owners on the right foot,” she said. “At the end of the day, it’s about the care of the animal and getting it back to the rightful owner.”

PET ADDRESS FACES CHALLENGES

Pet Address works well, but it faces some challenges, according to microchip registry authorities. Some animals are listed under more than one register and can be potentially frustrating for authorities looking them up, explained Dr Black. One register may have redundant or not current data, and waste time in finding the register with the most up-to-date contact information.

“One of the initiatives Pet Address is working on is to only list the register with the most current pet owner data,” he said. “Important records cannot be deleted, just made inactive.”

Another issue of nuisance involves maintaining a chain of ownership of the microchip.

“There’s a crying need for some point of national registry for microchip distributors in Australia,” said Dr Black. “People are sourcing microchips from overseas and selling to various authorised implanters in Australia. When these microchips are being implanted, they may not be entered onto a registry database. What registries then rely on is a skeleton record to those microchips and where they were sold to.”

Here’s an example: when a dog is found with a microchip that is not on any registry database (the chip wasn’t registered for whatever reason), the chip can then be traced back to the distributor and then the implanter (ie vet clinic) who can then look up the dog’s owner.

“If we find the owner contact information has not been updated, in that instance the dog will never be reunited with the family,” said Dr Black. “If we knew from the national microchip distributor registry the clinic that implanted the chip, we can then contact the clinic to try to locate the pet’s owner.”

Another issue that can be a concern is microchip failure, which isn’t common but if it happens it will more likely happen in a cheaper, less quality assured product, said Dr Black.

“If microchip failure occurs, it is vital to be able to know who imported and sold that chip, or that batch of chips to then alert pet owners who have had pets identified using that same brand or batch of microchip,” he explained. “This is another reason that a national registry of microchip distributors should exist – to minimise the risk of a pet not being found and to hold all microchip distributors accountable.”

One way to check that microchips are working is for vets to scan the microchips on a regular basis – for instance, every time the pet comes in for a health check, he suggested.

IMPORTED ANIMALS MUST HAVE ISO CHIP

Another reason why chips can fail to be read is that it’s not the same technology detected by scanners in Australia.

ACT veterinarian Dr Michael Hayward, who represented the Australian Veterinary Association in the Animal Registries Working Group, said a small population of animals microchipped overseas with a different (non-ISO) technology come into Australia and scanners cannot decipher the chip,

