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Dr Miranda Coffey
Project Officer
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Regulation and Compliance
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Dear Dr Coffey

Brachycephalic in dogs and cats discussion paper

Thank you for inviting AVA to comment on the above.

The discussion paper was circulated to those vets that are members of our AVA Victorian email discussion group which includes approximately 35 members.

We understand that the intended purpose of the paper is for discussion on the welfare implications of brachycephalic head shape and how this might best be addressed from the point of view of breeding boundaries. Members generally agree this is an interesting discussion and overwhelmingly agree it is a good idea to raise the subject of brachycephalic in dogs and cats and its potential to cause major health effects.

The group believe it would be a difficult task for the government to introduce a breed standard but an education program to influence breeders and the general public to select less severe forms of brachycephalic animals would be ideal.

There are many breeds that are popular and have brachycephalism that could well be healthier if less extreme forms were bred. Breeders and dog show judges need to be influenced to understand that healthier anatomical specimens are much better for the welfare of their breeds.

These problems are generally most common and more severe in the English bulldog. Other brachycephalic breeds in which this syndrome is found include the Pug, Boston Terrier, Pekingese, Cavalier King Charles Spaniel, Chinese Shar-Pei, French bulldog, Lhasa Apso, and Shih Tzu.

The studies to determine the mode of inheritance or the frequency in the breed have not been carried out, or are inconclusive. With the breeds listed in the above paragraph, there is a consensus among investigators and veterinary practitioners, that the condition creates significant health and welfare issues.

Selection for exaggerated features has resulted in the respiratory difficulties in these breeds. For example - breed standards for the English bulldog specify that the face should be very short, as should the distance between the tip of the nose and where it is set deep between the eyes. It is hardly surprising that this leaves little room for the structures involved in normal breathing.

This syndrome is directly related to the conformation or standards for these breeds. Although so common as to be accepted as normal for brachycephalics, BAOS causes serious physical problems and discomfort for individual dogs. Breed improvement by breeding away from the extremes of conformation that cause these problems, is a challenge for responsible breeders.

Dogs with pronounced breathing difficulties or that have required surgery to correct airway obstruction, should not be used for breeding. These dogs should be neutered at the time surgical correction is performed but realistically it will be challenging to convince breeders to cease breeding.

A suggested general principle is that when health issues that relate to genetic conformation are identified in the clinic, these be recorded along with objective data such as measurements etc. The underlying principle should be to start with the health issues and work towards protecting the future health of the breed(s). This requires collection and sharing of clinical data. A protocol for generating this information may help. Problems will always arise when breeders chase specific, often arbitrary, attributes that are linked to poor health outcomes.

Developing an information sheet for breeders and/or guidance in the *Code of Practice for the Responsible Breeding of Animals with Heritable Defects that cause Disease* would be a starting point and may assist in getting the science across but this would really require a worldwide push as Victorian breeders often import dogs and semen from interstate and overseas.

It was also noted by the group that combining syringomyelia and brachycephalism on the one paper may confuse the issue as the two are distinct and separate conditions.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this issue and if we can be of further assistance, please contact me.

Regards,



Dr Patricia Stewart
President
Australian Veterinary Association (Victorian Division)