



Policy Position: Extreme conformation in dogs

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Introduction

The conformation of a dog refers to its overall physical structure and appearance. Due to man's desire for variation in dogs since early domestication, dogs now exhibit highly varying conformation both between breeds and within a breed. However, breeding to moderate and non-exaggerated conformation is highly important to maintain health and function (The Kennel Club, 2018). Extreme conformation in dogs can be defined as when an animal's body shape, structure or appearance has the potential to result in a negative impact on health and welfare (BVA, 2018). Examples include brachycephalic (flat-faced) dogs, such as the Pug, Bulldog and French bulldog, "long and low" dogs, such as the Dachshund and Basset Hound and dogs of extreme size, such as "teacup" breeds (BVA, 2018).

The pedigree-dog industry has previously faced criticism because certain 'fixed' aspects of dog conformation specified by kennel club breed standards can have detrimental impacts on health and welfare (Asher et al., 2009). In 2009, the UK Kennel Club's 'Dog Health Group' conducted a comprehensive review of all breed standards to encourage the breeding of healthier dogs. Every description was checked to avoid interpretation as promoting features that might prevent dogs from breathing, walking or seeing freely. Following consultation, 78 breed standards were amended. However, problems can still arise when breeders do not refer to the breed standards and continue to breed dogs with exaggerated features just because there is buyer demand for a certain look (The Kennel Club, 2018). Some show judges also play a part in the continued acceptance of extremes by awarding prizes to dogs which exhibit extreme physical characteristics.

A recent study focused on Chihuahuas, French bulldogs and Cavalier King Charles Spaniels to explore decision-making on purchases of breeds with potential welfare problems related to extreme conformation (Sandoe et al., 2017). The study concluded that, of the breeds examined, the available information about the problems in Chihuahuas and French bulldogs has not served to prevent their growing popularity. It was identified that emotional responses to the characteristics of these breeds were highly influential positive motivators to buying and owning these dogs. Therefore there is a need to find effective ways to encourage prospective owners to demand dogs with less predisposition to welfare problems related to extreme conformation (Sandoe et al., 2017, Packer et al., 2017).

Issues

The foremost issue is that extreme conformation can negatively affect the health and welfare of dogs. Each of the most common 50 dog breeds is reported with at least one aspect of its conformation predisposing it to a disorder; and 84 disorders have been directly or indirectly associated with conformation (Asher et al., 2009). In addition, extreme conformation in a dog has consequences for the owner and for society as a whole.

Consequences for dogs

Brachycephalic dogs are becoming increasingly popular in the UK. As a consequence of selective breeding for extreme appearance, a significant proportion of brachycephalic dogs suffer from a range of associated health problems. These include anatomical defects of the upper airway resulting in breathing difficulties (e.g. Brachycephalic Obstructive Airway Syndrome (BOAS)), sleep apnoea and regurgitation (O'Neill et al., 2015, Packer et al., 2015b). They are also predisposed to eye disease (O'Neill et al., 2017a, Packer et al., 2015a), skin disease as a result of excessive skin folds and are at risk of dystocia (difficult birth) due to mismatch between the size of the puppies' heads and the mothers' birth canal (BVA, 2018, O'Neill et al., 2017b).

Selection for the "long and low" morphology of dog breeds, e.g. Dachshund and Basset Hound, has resulted in a disproportionate dwarfism which predisposes these dogs to intervertebral disc extrusion (IVDE). IVDE can result in spinal compression and injury which can severely compromise quality of life through pain and sensory and motor function compromise (BVA, 2018, Packer et al., 2016, Packer et al., 2013).

Other health issues that arise as a result of extreme conformation include skin and ear conditions, which are two of the most common disorders diagnosed by veterinarians in practice (O'Neill et al., 2014). Dogs with excessive amounts of skin or excessive skin folds may develop inflammation, irritation and infection in the skin folds. Dogs with excessively long ears and large amounts of hair in and around them may be more prone to ear infection, inflammation and itchiness (The Kennel Club, 2018).

Consequences for owners

Owning a puppy or adult dog with an extreme conformation can be very challenging. There are often high medical and surgical bills and these animals may require more complicated care than other dog breeds e.g. having to avoid warm weather, excitement and activities. In addition, poor health and welfare or early death of a pet results in significant emotional trauma for the owner (FECAVA, 2018).

Consequences for society

The demand for certain dogs, e.g. brachycephalic breeds, can result in an increase in unscrupulous breeders and puppy farms to satisfy the demand. These dogs are often more likely to suffer from conformational-related health problems as a consequence of their breeding. As a result of the health problems dogs with extreme conformation may face, there are increased numbers of unwanted dogs, which has resulted in an increased burden on rescue centres (FECAVA, 2018).

DBRG position

DBRG believes that any activity that compromises the health and welfare of dogs is a major concern. DBRG agrees with the BVA that breeding decisions should be taken with the aim of conferring healthy or healthier conformational traits, being mindful of the potential health and welfare impact of selection for specific or desirable structural features. DBRG believes that a collaborative approach between the veterinary profession, owners and keepers, breeders, registering bodies, breed clubs and societies, academics, animal charities and those with a commercial interest in the use of animals and their images is necessary in targeting the problem (BVA, 2018, Fawcett et al., 2018).

DBRG Recommendations

The BVA has set out 10 key recommendations for stakeholders across animal health and welfare that DBRG supports (BVA, 2018). Their specific recommendations are:

Recommendation 1: BVA encourages all veterinary surgeons to participate in reporting schemes regarding surgery to correct health and welfare problems relating to conformation where these exist.

Recommendation 2: BVA encourages veterinary surgeons to advise keepers not to breed from companion or production animals that have required a caesarean section due to birthing difficulties that are a result of extreme conformation.

Recommendation 3: In companion animals, neutering should be encouraged as a means of preventing the perpetuation of extremes of conformation.

Recommendation 4: Animals showing extremes of conformation that negatively affect their health and welfare should not be used for breeding.

Recommendation 5: Breed Standards for animals with extreme conformation should be reviewed according to evidence and be clear in their definitions of healthy conformations. This could be achieved using diagrams, quantitative ratios and conformational limits and developed in consultation with expert veterinary input. Show judges across sectors and species areas eg. Dog shows, agricultural shows etc. have a role in ensuring that only animals that demonstrate healthy conformation are placed, encouraging improvements to breed health and incentivising the selection of healthy parents as part of the breeding process.

Recommendation 6: BVA would welcome the development of breed-specific objective assessment measurements, ratios or indices to contribute to the assessment of problematic extreme conformations leading to negative health and welfare impacts.

Recommendation 7: Breeders and keepers should carefully consider the health and welfare problems associated with the extreme conformation of certain breed-types across companion and production animals. Breeders should comply with current animal welfare legislation when undertaking breeding decisions and consult with a veterinary surgeon to enable informed decisions as to whether certain animals can be responsibly bred to confer healthy conformational traits.

Recommendation 8: Prospective owners and keepers should carefully consider the health and welfare problems associated with certain breed-types and speak to their veterinary surgeon to obtain advice before purchasing animals.

Recommendation 9: The use of images or videos of animals with extreme conformation in advertising and marketing materials should be avoided so as to encourage responsible ownership and avoid the normalisation of poor health amongst these animals. We would encourage veterinary practices, marketers and designers to consult the BVA Good practice guidance for the responsible use of pet animals in advertising before commissioning and using animals in marketing materials or consult with their local vet.

Recommendation 10: Research should be carried out to better understand the social influences that drive breed demand in order to develop targeted educational strategies that will influence purchasing behaviours and breeding/production drivers.

DBRG further recommends that new secondary legislation under the Animal Welfare Act, 2006 is urgently produced requiring that anyone breeding dogs should have due regard to the genotype, phenotype and health of breeding parents to avoid adverse health and welfare effects of extreme conformation in offspring. Additionally, guidance to breeders and the public should be made available in a statutory Code of Practice for the Breeding of Dogs.

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