



Gudrun Ravetz President of the British Veterinary Association

Gudrun Ravetz is the President of the British Veterinary Association. Growing up in North West England, Gudrun graduated from the University of Liverpool Institute of Veterinary Science in 2002. Now living in Skirwith, Cumbria, with her young family, Gudrun is an external interviewer for prospective veterinary students at the University of Liverpool and Chief Veterinary Officer for Denplan Pet Health Plans.

Conformation-altering surgeries, caesareans and data – the veterinary team’s role?

Gudrun Ravetz President of the British Veterinary Association

There are over 9 million dogs in the UK and, according to statistics from the British Veterinary Association’s (BVA) Voice of the Veterinary Profession survey (Autumn 2015), two-thirds of vets (67%) reported seeing dogs that required conformation-altering surgeries and caesareans in the previous 12 months. The issue around dog health and welfare caused by the popularity of certain dog breeds is well known to those in the veterinary profession; however, statistics like this demonstrate that action needs to be taken to prevent the welfare situation of UK dogs declining further.

The current situation

Poor breed health affects the quality and quantity of a dog’s life, unarguably causing unnecessary suffering. Many issues are the result of the puppy farm trade’s poor breeding practices creating unwell puppies to satisfy today’s want-it-now culture, while others come from the breeding of certain dogs for their looks to create exaggerated and unhealthy features. According to the RSPCA, due to the unnaturally large heads of bulldog breeds, 86% of all British bulldog litters and 81% of French bulldog litters must now be born by caesarean.

The Kennel Club Breed Register shows that the popularity of brachycephalic breeds, such as bulldogs and pugs, has grown exponentially in recent years, with the number of Kennel Club-registered French bulldogs increasing over 27 times in 10 years (2015 registrations compared to 2006 registrations). This shows that despite the known health problems of the breeds, demand for these dogs is rising.

Brachycephalic dog breeds have taken up many headlines in the press over the last few months, with emphasis being placed on the poor health of these dogs. Brachycephalic Obstructive Airway Syndrome (BOAS) is a result of exaggerated face shape and is caused by “the shortening of the bones of the canine muzzle, without an equivalent reduction in the soft tissues held within them, causing the tissue to become ‘crammed’ within the skull” (UFAW, November 2015). For many of these dogs that suffer with BOAS it is like trying to breathe through a drinking straw, making it difficult for the dog to walk, play or eat normally and putting them at severe risk of easily overheating and collapsing. Often, the only recourse is surgery to widen the nasal passages, altering the dog’s conformation to prevent further suffering.

BOAS is just one of the health issues linked to brachycephalic dog breeds and, as their popularity continues to rise, rescue centres are seeing more and more of these dogs abandoned, often due to the owners being unable to afford the vets’ fees that result from buying a dog that, due to its poor breeding, has poor health. For example, the number of pugs given up to Battersea Dogs and Cats Home has doubled over the last five years and last year the veterinary team there performed brachycephalic condition-related surgeries on over 20 dogs.

Other brachycephalic health issues include problems associated with eyes such as entropion, ectropion and distichiae. Although these can occur in any dog, they are more commonly found in brachycephalic breeds and those breeds

with skin folds on their faces such as the Shar Pei, bloodhounds, Clumber spaniels, chow chows and mastiffs, to name a few. These eye problems require conformation-altering surgery to prevent ongoing serious issues such as ulcers, infections and potential blindness.

Many of the dogs requiring conformation-altering surgery have incredibly dedicated and loving owners, but unfortunately the current status of many of the dog breeds in the UK means their poor health is leading to underlying issues and suffering.

What can the veterinary professions do?

Moving towards a population of healthier dogs that are all responsibly bred will take time. However, there are many areas where the veterinary professions can take the lead in promoting better dog welfare, including educating puppy owners and engaging with local breeders.

Vet-client bond

Only 4% of pet owners take advice from a vet before taking on a pet, according to PDSA's Animal Wellbeing Report 2015. Yet veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses have vital roles to play in owner education. By speaking to potential dog owners, the veterinary professions can highlight the possible health issues associated with certain breeds and emphasise characteristics to look out for when choosing a puppy. Vets and vet nurses can have a positive impact in making sure that potential owners understand all of their duties to their prospective puppy and ensure that the puppy they choose is physically and mentally healthy and the right fit for their family.

The Puppy Contract and Puppy Information Pack is a great go-to tool that has been developed to empower puppy buyers to help them to avoid the problems that can arise from buying a puppy from an irresponsible breeder. Puppy buyers can use the information provided by the breeder or seller in conjunction with advice from their veterinary practice team to make a decision on whether they should buy the puppy they have seen. It also makes clear the seller's and buyer's responsibilities in relation to the puppy's

health and welfare. A downloadable version of the Puppy Contract can be found at puppycontract.rspca.org.uk.

Practice data submissions

One area where veterinary input is vital is in the submission of data to the relevant research databases for any conformation-altering surgeries and caesareans that are performed in practice. A data drive could help to reduce avoidable hereditary problems, prevent further lifelong discomfort and suffering, and improve health and welfare for future generations of dogs.

Every year the Kennel Club receives over 3200 data submissions from vets and dog owners about conformation-altering surgeries and caesareans carried out on Kennel Club-registered dogs, yet the majority of these come from dog owners themselves. Sharing data about conformation-altering surgeries and caesareans is vital to help build a picture of the current situation, and facilitate measures to improve health and welfare for future generations of dogs.

Although the reporting is only for Kennel Club-registered dogs, the information collected by the Kennel Club provides vital data about breeds and breeding lines appearing to perpetuate certain defects. For example, data submitted for caesareans prevent the registration of puppies born to a bitch that has already had two litters delivered by caesarean section, while data submitted for conformation-altering surgeries allows the Kennel Club to make decisions on whether to allow affected dogs to be entered for shows. In the longer term, measures implemented by the Kennel Club will include analysis of all submitted data to create a research database that will provide an evidence base to influence the future of dog welfare. It will also impact on the Kennel Club Breed Watch and Breed Standards.

When asked about operations carried out on Kennel Club-registered dogs, the majority of veterinary professionals said that they do submit data on conformation-altering surgeries (60%) and caesareans (65%); however, 15% of survey respondents revealed that they never submit data. Those who do not always report gave "time" as the main reason for not doing so; however, the Kennel Club has recently launched a new online system for making data submissions quicker

and easier at www.thekennelclub.org.uk/csections.

Not all dogs presented at a practice are Kennel Club-registered; however, it is still vital that any surgery carried out to alter conformation or any caesareans performed are reported to a database where possible. The Veterinary Companion Animal Surveillance System (Vet Compass) is an international initiative focused on improving companion animal health. It runs a number of research projects which rely on data from veterinary practices to enable them to build a strong body of evidence from which to draw conclusions and improve dog health. SAVSNET is another important database where details of conformation-altering surgeries can be submitted. This joint venture between the British Small Animal Veterinary Association (BSAVA) and the University of Liverpool aims to monitor disease and illness of companion animals in the UK.

Submitting data does take time out of an already busy day for the veterinary team; however, with so many organisations making a commitment to researching and improving dog breed health and welfare, and using online systems to make submitting data easier and quicker, the short amount of time taken to submit this data could have a huge impact on breed health in the UK.

To aid this process, earlier this year BVA produced a poster for members' practices that provides more information and top tips on how to submit data on conformation-altering surgeries and caesareans to the Kennel Club. This is available, along with a FAQ about data submissions, at www.bva.co.uk/dog-breeding.

The big picture

Brachycephalic breeds have also become popular with the media, often being used to promote well-known brands or being found on the front of greetings cards. To counter the growing popularity and visibility of these breeds, initiatives such as The Campaign for the Responsible Use of Flat-Faced Animals (CRUFFA) is calling for a ban on these dogs being used in advertising and the media. Vet practices could also avoid using images of these breeds in any promotional work or on their social media to curb the growing

trend that these breeds are cute and appealing to buy.

What is BVA doing?

For many years BVA has worked with several organisations towards improving dog breed health and welfare, including

BSAVA, the Kennel Club, the All Party Group for Animal Welfare (APGAW), the Pet Advertising Advisory Group (PAAG) as well as animal welfare charities and organisations.

As we continue to lobby governments across the UK, and work, both behind the

scenes and in the media, to do everything we can to improve the health and welfare of dog breeds in the UK, we urge veterinary practice teams to recognise the importance of submitting data and to work with clients to deliver the best possible welfare outcomes for dogs.



BVNA
British Veterinary
Nursing Association

Delving Deeper into Wounds

Become the dedicated practice wound nurse!

6 month blended learning course
2 contact teaching days
4 distance learning modules
80 hours of accredited CPD

- Wound physiology
- Optimised healing
- Management techniques
- Improving welfare and reducing costs

Sponsored by



*BVNA Members

The Veterinary
Wound Library 
Unlock your healing potential

£525*
+VAT

For more information and to book please visit www.bvna.org.uk/cpd
Or contact BVNA Tel: 01279 408644 E-mail: cpd@bvna.co.uk