

Press information

Vets must ‘dare to speak out’ Urgent action on brachycephalic dogs called for during panel discussion at FECAVA/WSAVA/DSAVA Congress in Copenhagen

The rise in the popularity of so-called brachycephalic (flat-faced) breeds, including pugs and French bulldogs, is linked to concerning trends for dog health and welfare, according to the Federation of European Companion Animal Veterinary Associations (FECAVA), the World Small Animal Veterinary Association (WSAVA) and the Danish Small Animal Veterinary Association (DSAVA/FHKS).

Experts from around the world discussed the issues facing these breeds and the implications for veterinarians during a panel session following a lecture stream dedicated to hereditary disease and the importance of responsible breeding on Tuesday 26 September during FECAVA-WSAVA Congress in Copenhagen. More than 200 delegates attended, including Danish TV celebrity, Sebastian Klein, well known for his interest in animal welfare issues. At the end of the session, panel members issued a number of recommendations to help veterinarians to take steps to improve the health and welfare of brachycephalic dogs (see below).

During discussions, panel members were questioned on strategies to help address the problem in particular countries. Panellist Helle Friis Proschowsky explained that The Nordic Kennel Union had issued recommendations and breed-specific guidelines for judges but acknowledged that the majority of brachycephalic dogs in all countries were unlikely to be registered with a kennel club. Panellist Peter Sandøe confirmed that only 15% of French bulldogs in Denmark were registered, the majority coming from unregistered breeders. “The education of owners remains the most important priority,” commented Helle Friis Proschowsky.

‘Dare to speak out’

Soft tissue surgeon and panellist Laurent Findji said he had seen the explosion in the popularity of French bulldogs at first hand because of the number he was now operating on. FECAVA Vice President Wolfgang Dohne called on vets to help brachycephalic dogs but to advise owners to neuter their animals if they have conformation-altering disorders. Panellist Gudrun Ravetz, Senior Vice President of the British Veterinary Association said that, in the UK, owners and breeders now consent to having conformation-altering surgery reported: “However, while a recent BVA survey showed that 67% of vets say they see breed-related problems, few submit conformation-altering data to the Kennel Club though this would support the development of evidence-based solutions.” She added: “As veterinarians we must educate ourselves.”

“Vets should dare to speak out,” commented panellist Kristin Wear Prestrud. “We must educate owners on all health and welfare matters, whether we are simply advising them that their dog is overweight or if we need to give advice on breeding or refuse planned Caesarean sections.”

Urge advertisers to stop using images of flat-faced dogs

Toril Moseng, President of the Norwegian Veterinary Association, highlighted initiatives carried out in Norway, including an awareness-raising petition signed by 1,700 veterinarians; a press release urging advertisers not to use brachycephalic breeds in campaigns and a hand-out produced for brachycephalic breed owners, letting them know 'what to expect.' Similar work has been done by the British Veterinary Association explained Gudrun Ravetz. "We contacted advertisers and many apologised saying that they were simply unaware of the problems."

Commenting on the session, DSAVA President Anne Sørensen said: "The fact that so many participated so actively in the discussion shows the seriousness with which veterinarians view this issue. There is no easy answer but by working together and sharing experiences and successes, we will start to change the minds of pet owners who think that these animals are cute when many of them are, in fact, born into a life of suffering. We thank all those who joined us to highlight this important issue and especially Sebastian Klein. His attendance has helped us to highlight the issue to the dog-owning public in Denmark."

Education and raising awareness

FECAVA President Jerzy Gawor commented: "As veterinarians, we put the best interests of our patients first. For affected animals – including flat-faced dogs but also cats and rabbits - this may involve performing surgical procedures to correct or overcome conformational disorders, such as enlarging the nostrils, shortening the soft palate, correcting the bite or performing Caesarean sections. We are concerned that these procedures – which should be exceptional – are becoming the norm in many brachycephalic breeds."

WSAVA President Walt Ingwersen added: "Our members see the results of extreme brachycephalic confirmation in practice on a regular basis and it is one of our top animal welfare concerns. The discussion panel helped to highlight the complex issues raised by the popularity of these breeds and to explore potential solutions. A reduction in the health problems faced by these breeds will be most effectively achieved through the education of veterinary professionals, breeders and owners and through leadership and consensus-building between stakeholders."

Vets should 'show leadership'

All three associations committed to develop and contribute to initiatives that aim to address the health and welfare of these animals. Panellist Professor Åke Hedhammar, member of the WSAVA Hereditary Disease Committee and scientific advisor to the Swedish Kennel Club, stressed: "We will continue to work with all stakeholders who can positively influence and improve the health and welfare of brachycephalic breeds. Extreme phenotypes should be avoided and, in the show ring, moderation of such phenotypes should be rewarded. Animals showing extremes of conformation that negatively impact their health and welfare should not be used for breeding."

FECAVA past president Monique Megens, who chaired the discussion, concluded: "As advocates of and experts in animal health and welfare, veterinarians should speak up and show leadership in taking action against the breeding of dog with excessive traits leading to health and welfare problems. The great attendance at the panel discussion shows the willingness of the profession to do

so. We hope that the recommendations prepared by our panellists will be adopted by veterinarians and by veterinary associations all over the world, leading to a future with healthy and happy dogs.”

Notes for Editors

- The World Small Animal Veterinary Association ([WSAVA](#)) aims to advance the health and welfare of companion animals worldwide through creating an educated, committed and collaborative global community of veterinary peers. It currently represents more than 200,000 veterinarians through 105 member associations. Its annual World Congress brings together globally respected experts to offer cutting edge thinking on all aspects of companion animal veterinary care.
- The Federation of European Companion Animal Veterinary Associations ([FECAVA](#)) is the platform for the promotion of the professional development and representation of companion animal veterinarians in Europe. Founded in 1990, it currently has 40 national member associations and 13 associate member associations. FECAVA represents over 25,000 companion animal practitioners throughout Europe.
- The Danish Small Animal Veterinary Association (SvHKS) represents small animal veterinarians in Denmark and has around 1,000 members. It was the host organisation for the 2017 FECAVA/WSAVA Congress.
- Members of the expert panel were:
 - Peter Sandøe (DK) – professor of ethics and welfare
 - Helle Friis Proschowsky (DK) – vet working with the Danish Kennel Club
 - Laurent Findji (FR/UK) – specialist in soft tissue surgery
 - Gudrun Ravetz (UK) – Senior Vice President, British Veterinary Association
 - Kristin Wear Prestrud (NO) – veterinary scientific director of the Norwegian Kennel Club
 - Åke Hedhammar (SE), professor em. in internal medicine (companion animals), veterinary consultant for the Swedish Kennel Club and member of the WSAVA Hereditary Disease Committee.
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Expert recommendations: the vet’s role

Following the panel discussion on the health and welfare of brachycephalic dogs on 26 September, the expert panel issued a number of recommendations for veterinarians as below:

As advocates of, and experts in, animal health and welfare, veterinarians should speak up and show leadership in taking action against the breeding of dogs with excessive traits which can lead to health and welfare problems, such as brachycephalic obstructive airway syndrome (BOAS).

At a PRACTICE level, veterinarians should:

1. Advise the public **not to buy animals with extreme conformation**. This applies both to breeds and to individual dogs.

2. **Raise awareness among dog owners** and advise them about health and welfare issues in dogs with extreme conformations.
3. **Raise awareness among breeders, breed clubs and show judges** and advise them as to health and welfare issues in dogs with extreme conformations. Take an active role in pre-breeding examinations and in giving advice regarding potential breeding stock.
4. **Inform dog owners and breeders about breeding restrictions** if a dog is surgically treated for BOAS or other problems related to extreme traits linked to breeding. (In countries where no such restrictions exist, strongly advise against breeding.) **Advise neutering** at the time of surgery if good practice allows.
5. **Share data on health and welfare issues related to extreme breeding.** Where a national submission system exists, **submit details on conformation-altering surgery and caesarean sections** related to extreme breeding traits.

At PROFESSIONAL ORGANISATION level, veterinarians should:

1. Implement a communication campaign to proactively **raise awareness** among the public in general and to advise them about health and welfare issues in dogs with extreme conformations.
2. Work together with national cynological organisations and other stakeholders to set up **registers of confirmation-altering surgeries and caesarean sections** as well as relevant **screening programmes** (ie pre-breeding examinations).
3. Call for the **revision of breed standards** to help prevent BOAS and other brachycephalic-related disorders. Breed standards should include evidence-based limits on physical features (eg muzzle length) and approaches such as outcrossing should be considered.
4. Launch and distribute **veterinary health certificates for puppies** and/or checklists for prospective buyers in support of responsible, healthy breeding.
5. Develop evidence-based international **standardised protocols for the examination of breeding animals** regarding respiratory function and thermoregulation.
6. Set up systems allowing the **gathering of data from veterinary practices** regarding health and welfare-related issues in dogs with extreme conformations.
7. Set up **undergraduate training / CPD** to equip vets to take a more active role in providing breeding advice to breeders, breeder organisations and judges, related to extreme conformation and screening procedures.

Copenhagen, 26 September 2017.