The brachycephalic debate continues

Health problems in brachycephalic dog breeds may already be the number one welfare issue for small animal practitioners but the situation is predicted to get a lot worse.

Practitioners are reporting greatly increased numbers of clients presenting with French Bulldogs, Pugs, English Bulldogs and other small short-muzzled breeds, driven at least in part by celebrity endorsements and the use of these dogs in films and advertising. “There are dogs that have such difficulty breathing that they fall asleep standing up – how have we got ourselves into this mess?” asked Chris Laurence, former Chief Veterinary Officer for the Dogs Trust.

Dan O’Neill, Senior Lecturer in companion animal epidemiology at the Royal Veterinary College, cautioned that any response from the veterinary profession must be backed by solid evidence. But he said the data produced on first-opinion consultations through the Vet Compass project does reinforce those concerns. Vet Compass is generating figures that take account of factors missing from statistics based solely on Kennel Club registrations – unregistered puppies and those imported legally or illegally to meet the current demand, he said. These figures show that up to 15% of new puppies are from brachycephalic breeds and that the French Bulldog accounted for nearly 4% of consultations in 2018, up from less than 0.1% in 2004.

Direct comparisons between the numbers of patients from the three most common brachycephalic breeds and three similar sized breeds with more conventional morphology (Yorkshire, West Highland White and Border terriers) have also confirmed that they are significantly more prone to health issues such as breathing problems and corneal ulcers.

The Vet Compass data, published in the Open Access journal Canine Genetics and Epidemiology have demonstrated an increased odds ratio in brachycephalic dogs for a number of conditions in which their skull shape is considered a risk factor. However, the single most common disease condition identified for these breeds was obesity. “That at least is some good news: you cannot stop a dog from being a Pug, but you can stop it from becoming overweight,” Dr O’Neill said.

The profession must be aware that the various health problems identified in these breeds will only become more serious with time, he warned. As Pugs and French Bulldogs have only recently become popular, the median age of these dogs in the survey was significantly lower than that of the general dog population. As conditions like corneal ulcers become both more frequent and more difficult to treat with age, these dogs are likely to suffer increasingly worse health problems in the next few years.

Dr O’Neill predicted that the surge in popularity of these breeds will also cause growing problems for animal welfare charities. “A spike in popularity of a breed will always be followed by a spike in the numbers of dogs being relinquished. The welfare charities are already inundated and it is becoming very difficult to rehome these dogs – there is a huge welfare issue coming our way.”

If veterinarians are to contribute to efforts to tackle these welfare concerns, they need to understand the psychological factors that make owners want to own a brachycephalic dog, warned Dr Rowena Packer from the Royal Veterinary College. “She said that surveys in the UK and abroad have identified changes in pet owners’ preferences – they are increasingly wanting smaller, short-haired breeds which fit in better with modern lifestyles. But they are also choosing dogs with flatter faces, larger eyes and round heads, the neotenous (infant-like) characteristics that bring out the care-giving instinct. There is mounting evidence to show that prospective owners are not discouraged by the fact that these characteristics may be associated with health or behavioural problems. Instead they only make them more appealing to some owners as they create an affectionate, vulnerable and needy pet that is considered appealing.

Worryingly, Dr Packer’s research indicates that the high initial cost of a brachycephalic puppy and the ongoing time, money and effort needed to look after them would not discourage owners from choosing another of the same breed. They see themselves as specialist owners of specialist dogs, she said.

Meanwhile, the next generation of pet owners is growing up believing that these unhealthy characteristics are desirable, due to the influence of dogs seen in advertising and feature films. She warned that these effects on preferences can be long lasting. “There is a film due for release next year called Patrick, in which the title character is a Pug. We should prepare ourselves for this,” she said.

Veterinary anaesthetist Dr Polly Taylor suggested that the health problems of these breeds may be directly linked to their appealing behavioural characteristics. These dogs are docile because they are permanently out of breath and restoring a healthy airway could help dogs such as Bulldogs to recapture the aggressive qualities that they were originally bred for.

Ultimately, however, the solution to the welfare problems in these breeds will need to involve the creation of healthier puppies that retain the affectionate natures that have made them so popular. Dr O’Neill said there was some cause for optimism here with the formation of the Brachycephalic Working Group (BWG), an alliance between the major breed societies, the Kennel Club, welfare organizations, welfare charities and veterinary organizations including the BSAVA.

The BWG has drawn up a seven-point action plan aimed at alleviating the health problems in these breeds. As part of this, the Kennel Club has taken responsibility for developing a breed health and conservation plan for the affected breeds and will oversee a review of the relevant breed standards.