World Veterinary Association (WVA) Factsheet
Why brachycephaly in dogs is a problem

‘Flat faced’ dogs such as English Bulldogs, French Bulldogs and Pugs have become very fashionable in recent years. Many people buy these dogs because they think they look cute. This has caused breeders to emphasize the exaggerated ‘flat faced’ look in existing breeds and introduce new breeds with extreme brachycephaly such as the ‘Exotic Bully’. What people don’t realise is that a ‘flat faced’ appearance is not normal: it is part of a combination of abnormal conformational characteristics in brachycephalic breeds that can have serious consequences for the animal health and quality of life. It can also result in the need for expensive veterinary care.

What is brachycephaly in dogs?

The flat-faced conformation in dogs can cause a wide variety of health problems that compromise animal welfare. These include:

- Difficulty breathing (‘Brachycephalic obstructive airway syndrome’)
- Low tolerance for exercise
- Inability to tolerate heat and humidity
- Difficulty breeding normally
- Parturition often requires caesarean section, putting the dam and her puppies at risk

Why is brachycephaly in dogs a problem?

The following exaggerations result in health and welfare issues for dogs:

- Narrowed nostrils
- Excessively wide and short head
- Excessively thick neck
- Thick skin folds, particularly nasal
- Protruding eyes (corneal exposure)
- Spinal Curvature (vertebral malformations/ scoliosis/ kyphosis)
- Inverted or screw tails
- Entropion and ectropion of eyelids

Many of these dogs experience health and welfare problems from other malformations often associated with brachycephaly:

- Abnormal leg conformation including very short legs or ‘Queen Anne’ curved forelimbs
- Excessively long hair coat
- Excessively short back

How the problem can be addressed?

The problem can only be addressed if people stop wanting dogs with extreme brachycephalic characteristics or if breeders stop breeding them. People looking to get a dog should educate themselves about the health and welfare issues associated with any breed before buying a dog, particularly if it is a brachycephalic breed.

Breeders should act responsibly and work to reduce the exaggerated characteristics in their dogs to make them healthier pets. Dog breed registries have a duty to set standards that do not encourage extreme conformation and to direct potential owners towards responsible breeders.

What is the veterinarian's role?

Veterinarians actively work to reduce the health problems of brachycephalic breeds in several ways, including:

- Educating potential owners about the problems associated with brachycephaly
- Work with breeders to reduce the exaggerated features in the breeding program
- Not assist with breeding brachycephalic animals or make use of them in clinic advertising
- Work with breed clubs to change standards and reduce emphasis of extreme brachycephalic features in show judging

Resources for Further Information

- FVE Breeding for extreme conformations position paper. Available here
- Vets Against Brachycephalism. Available here. Last accessed 17.10.21