

Veterinary Ireland Media Release 19th May 2018

Designer Dogs Creating Suffering and Health Problems

MORE THAN A CUTE FACE WITH PUPPY EYES – VETS SAY ‘THINK TWICE’ BEFORE BUYING PUGS OR BULLDOGS

Irish vets are urging members of the public to “think twice” before buying a flat faced dog like a pug, bulldog or French bulldog.

“There could be distress and discomfort behind those big eyes and many pet owners who love dogs, may not be aware of the serious life-restricting health issues these breeds can be prone to,” said John O’Connor, Chair of the Veterinary Ireland Companion Animal Society (VICAS). He was speaking at the opening of the 2018 VICAS Conference in Naas, Co. Kildare (19th-20th May 2018).

Known as “*Brachycephalic*” dogs – flat-faced dogs like pugs have become a source of entertainment on social media, popular with celebrities and have been used in commercial advertising campaigns which tap in to their cute faces and characteristics. The result has been a huge increase in demand for these puppies around the world – with many dog breeders happy to meet that demand.

“This trend is really alarming. We are appealing to members of the public and dog breeders to take some time to understand why this is a big concern,” said John O’Connor. He explains that generations of selective breeding has emphasised the physical ‘cute’ and wrinkled faces of these breeds, with large, wide-set eyes and flat noses – breeding ‘appearance traits’ to appeal to humans, but often at the expense of the health and welfare of the dog.

A LIFETIME OF BREATHING THROUGH A PILLOW

“The reality is that the short skull shape, short muzzle and flat nose means that these dogs can suffer from ***Brachycephalic Obstructive Airway Syndrome*** (BOAS). Struggling to breathe, affected dogs can spend their life feeling like they are breathing through a pillow,” says John O’Connor. One in five Kennel Club registered breeds is now an extreme brachycephalic breed – up from one in 50 just 10 years ago, with many more brachycephalic puppies coming from sources that would not register their births with a Kennel Club.

The normal airway structure in an affected “*Brachycephalic*” dog is squashed into a shorter nose and skull space. The airways are twisted creating obstacles on the way to the lungs. Anyone who has spent time around these dogs will recognise that they can snore or grunt a lot. According to Veterinary Ireland, this is not ‘characterful’ because it is simply not ‘normal’ for a dog to snore in that way – what you are hearing is a dog struggling to get essential oxygen in to the body. Affected dogs can live in discomfort and even be prone to passing out.

MORE AWARENESS NEEDED TO SEE THE FULL PICTURE

Veterinary Ireland says that indiscriminately breeding these types of dogs in order to meet popular demand is causing more pain and discomfort and is not in the best interests of animal welfare. “As veterinarians our primary interest is in the health and wellbeing of animals. That is why we feel passionate about raising awareness about this issue amongst dog owners, prospective owners and breeders too,” says John O’Connor.

“We want people to understand the full picture when they see the cute face of a pug or bulldog on a T-shirt, in an ad or on social media.”



SURGERIES AND TREATMENTS NEEDED

With the growing popularity of these breeds, Irish vets increasingly have to treat many of the health consequences, with intrusive surgeries involving significant costs for the pet owner and anxiety for both the pet and the owner. Animals affected by breathing difficulties may need surgical procedures such as enlarging the nostrils or shortening the soft palate. Obstruction of the airways makes exercise challenging. These dogs are often vulnerable to heart disease and obesity can also be a significant concern. Some may not tolerate heat as they have difficulty cooling down.

There are other issues too. The out of proportion head size also means that many of these breeds cannot deliver puppies naturally and need to have caesarean sections. Some have spinal disease due to vertebral malformations. The wrinkled skin which is associated with pugs is not without its problems as the moist folds of skin can be very susceptible to infection.

Brachycephalic dogs' eyes tend to stick out of their skull a little more than others. They can be prone to eye ulcers. Sometimes it's difficult for eyelids to close over their eyes (even while sleeping) and they can be more exposed to accidents or vision issues. They have less space to fit their teeth, which can lead to periodontal disease.

“These issues are not something any dog lover should want for their pet,” says John O’Connor. Unfortunately, owners are often unaware of the potential suffering these dogs may go through. Research in the UK revealed that 60% of people who owned a dog with BOAS, did not recognise their pet dogs’ clinical signs as a problem (Packer et al., 2015).

VETERINARY IRELAND POLICY DOCUMENT & APPEAL TO ADVERTISERS

Irish Vets want to help to ensure that by 2030, all flat-faced dogs born in Ireland, can breathe with ease. Last November (2017), Veterinary Ireland members ratified a ***Policy Document on Brachycephalic Dogs*** and passed a motion at its AGM in relation to Brachycephalic Dogs, calling on the media to support the cessation of the use of flat-faced dog and cat breeds in all forms of advertising.

DESIGNER DOGS CREATING HEALTH PROBLEMS & SUFFERING

Selective breeding should not prioritise meeting a popular demand from humans, by introducing health problems which would otherwise be preventable. Responsible breeding should be about producing an animal that has the potential to have a healthy and happy life.

Whilst the Irish Kennel Club and their counterparts in the UK are aware of this issue, there are many other breeders selling pets to the public who need to be more aware of and more proactive about breeding healthier and happier dogs for future generations.

APPEAL TO MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC & PET OWNERS

There are some flat-faced dogs that will lead happy, normal lives and they are friendly dogs with charming personalities - so they can be wonderful and much loved pets. However there are so many others that will struggle throughout their entire life with breathing and life-limiting health issues.

“If you’re looking for a dog you can help to drive demand for a healthier population of dogs, with a better quality of life,” says John O’Connor.

You may like to consider a healthier breed, or a healthier version of these breeds – perhaps a crossbreed with a longer snout. This is a very complex issue and until there is a universally accepted health test for brachycephalic breeds, a simple approach is only ever buy a puppy if you meet both parents and see them, actively exercising, running and breathing normally through their noses, with little or preferably no airway noises.



If you already own a dog such as a pug or bulldog you should talk with your vet about pro-actively assessing and monitoring their health for breathing difficulties and other symptoms – and watch their weight very carefully.

“If your dog has *brachycephalic* issues or has ever been surgically treated for BOAS, then you should not be breeding your dog and should consider having your dog neutered,” says John O’Connor.

WORLDWIDE CONCERN

Irish vets are not alone in voicing their concerns. The rise in the popularity of brachycephalic breeds and associated concerns for dog health and welfare has come under the spotlight of the **Federation of European Companion Animal Veterinary Associations (FECAVA)** and the **World Small Animal Veterinary Association (WSAVA)**.

Speaking at the most recent FECAVA-WSAVA Congress in Copenhagen (September 2017) the WSAVA President Walt Ingwersen said: “***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.***”

Vets in other countries are voicing their concerns to help raise awareness about the issue. **The British Veterinary Association** has also been discouraging prospective dog owners from buying breeds like pugs and bulldogs, saying that their lives are like ‘breathing through a straw.’

VICAS CONFERENCE – FOCUS ON SENSES

The Veterinary Ireland Companion Animal Society (VICAS) Spring 2018 conference on Saturday 19th & Sunday 20th May, 2018 is taking place at the Killashee Hotel in Naas, Co Kildare. The main conference was preceded by practical lab sessions on Friday 18th May at the Irish Equine Centre in Naas.

The technical programme for this year’s VICAS Conference, including veterinarians and vet nurses, focuses on *The Senses – (eyes, ears, skin) – ‘Back to Basics and Beyond.’* Speakers involved in the technical presentations include:

- **Kathryn Cuddy** MVB CertAVP (DERM), founder of Skinvet Ireland, an ambulatory dermatology referral service for pets in Ireland, speaking about diseases of the skin in dogs and cats.
- **Dr. Sue Paterson** MA VetMB DVD Dip ECVD FRCVS, Rutland House Specialist Veterinary Referrals Centre based in Merseyside, UK, was recently elected as Fellow of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons for her contributions to clinical practice in the field of Veterinary Dermatology presented a number of lectures on Otitis – what is new, its best management and treating multi-drug resistant bacterial otitis.
- All things eyes - covered in four technical presentations by **Mike Woods** MVB Cert V Ophthal MRCVS. A former President of the European Society of Veterinary Ophthalmology and former Chair of VICAS/ICAVA who runs a referral service in Veterinary Ophthalmology from Primrose Hill Veterinary Clinic in Dublin, Mike Woods covered subjects ranging from corneal disease to eyelids.
- **Natasha Mitchell** MVB DV Ophthal MRCVS a specialist in Veterinary Ophthalmology based at Crescent Veterinary Clinic in Limerick, delivered presentations on subjects including Red Eye as well as ocular emergencies.
- **David McKeown** from the VDS (Veterinary Defence Society) discussed how to build resilience in to daily veterinary practice – not just to survive, but to thrive!

The conference features two joint veterinary and veterinary nursing lectures. These cover dermatology and also a robust and interactive round table welfare discussion, involving stakeholders with a diverse range of experiences and perspectives from an array of areas including the charitable sector, academia, industry and regulatory authority.



The conference has been co-ordinated by a VICAS Committee including vets Fiona MacDermott, Lydia Langley, John O'Connor, Andrea Dineen, Clare Eugster, Pat Drury and Danny Holmes.

ENDS

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Editorial Footnotes:

- **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.
- **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. It has 40 national member associations and 13 associate member associations. FECAVA represents over 25,000 companion animal practitioners throughout Europe.