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Do dog owners perceive the clinical signs related to conformational inherited disorders as ‘normal’ for the breed? A potential constraint to improving canine welfare

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Abstract

Selection for brachycephalic (foreshortened muzzle) phenotypes in dogs is a major risk factor for brachycephalic obstructive airway syndrome (BOAS). Clinical signs include respiratory distress, exercise intolerance, upper respiratory noise and collapse. Efforts to combat BOAS may be constrained by a perception that it is ‘normal’ in brachycephalic dogs. This study aimed to quantify owner-perception of the clinical signs of BOAS as a veterinary problem. A questionnaire-based study was carried out over five months on the owners of dogs referred to the Queen Mother Hospital for Animals (QMHA) for all clinical services, except for Emergency and Critical Care. Owners reported the frequency of respiratory difficulty and characteristics of respiratory noise in their dogs in four scenarios, summarised as an ‘owner-reported breathing’ (ORB) score. Owners then reported whether their dog currently has, or has a history of, ‘breathing problems’. Dogs (n = 285) representing 68 breeds were included, 31 of which were classed as ‘affected’ by BOAS either following diagnostics, or by fitting case criteria based on their ORB score, skull morphology and presence of stenotic nares. The median ORB score given by affected dogs’ owners was 20/40 (range 8–30). Over half (58%) of owners of affected dogs reported that their dog did not have a breathing problem. This marked disparity between owners’ reports of frequent, severe clinical signs and their perceived lack of a ‘breathing problem’ in their dogs is of concern. Without appreciation of the welfare implications of BOAS, affected but undiagnosed dogs may be negatively affected indefinitely through lack of treatment. Furthermore, affected dogs may continue to be selected in breeding programmes, perpetuating this disorder.

Keywords: animal welfare, brachycephalic, conformation, dog, owner perception, pedigree