



UNIVERSITIES FEDERATION FOR ANIMAL WELFARE

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Media Release

**From the
Universities Federation for Animal Welfare (UFAW)**

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For Immediate Release:**

‘Genetic welfare problems more extensive and serious than expected’ says UFAW.

During the past two years, UFAW has been developing a website to provide clear and comprehensive information about the welfare consequences of hereditary problems in companion animals: to explain how these problems affect the quality of animals’ lives. While undertaking the work it has discovered that the levels and extent of adverse welfare effects is even greater than was anticipated.

The purpose of the UFAW website on genetic welfare problems (www.ufaw.org.uk/geneticwelfareproblems.php) is to help people who are thinking of acquiring a pet to decide which species, strain or breed to choose – to be aware of problems and know the right questions to ask when buying in order to help avoid perpetuating the problems. The site also provides information relevant to helping breeders avoid or tackle problems. It is unique in providing comprehensive and detailed information, presented in a readily understandable way, not only on the genetic conditions themselves but also, most importantly, on their effects on the pet’s welfare, and in its aim of covering many other types of companion animal in addition to dogs and cats. As such it provides a valuable resource not only for the public, breeders and veterinarians, but also for other websites relating to pet choice, breeding and welfare.

"Preparing descriptions of all these genetic conditions for the website," said James Kirkwood, UFAW’s Chief Executive and Scientific Director, "has really brought home to us the extent and severity of the welfare problems that have arisen as a result of selection for arbitrary aspects of appearance. When, tens or hundreds of years ago people bred for the particular shapes, sizes and appearances that appealed to them, they had no idea that they were sometimes selecting for serious diseases at the same time. With advances in knowledge of animal diseases the serious nature of many of these problems has come to light."

For example, when breeders first selected for the curly tails of pugs – because they liked the look - no one suspected that this could cause serious disease. But we know now that they achieved the curly tail by selecting for deformed tail bones and that the mutation that causes these can also affect the bones of the spine in the chest or back. In these cases, the affected spine bones do not align properly and this can result in very painful injuries to the spinal cord. The spinal cord damage can also cause partial paralysis of the hind limbs and incontinence due to loss of bladder control. This condition is considered a common problem in Pugs and other short-nosed breeds with screw-tails (it is estimated that the UK population of Pugs alone is around 30,000).

(more...)

SCIENCE IN THE SERVICE OF ANIMAL WELFARE

Chief Executive and Scientific Director: James K Kirkwood BVSc PhD CBiol FIBiol MRCVS

Secretary: Donald C Davidson

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(‘Genetic welfare problems...continues, page 2 of 3)

The wolves from which all dogs are descended may have weighed about 25kg. Obviously, selection for larger and much smaller body sizes has been very successful: depending on the breed, adult dogs now range in weight from 1 to 100kg. But it seems that these changes in size have come at a price. For example, it has been estimated that each Great Dane has a 40% chance of developing gastric torsion. This acute disease typically occurs after a meal. The stomach twists – perhaps because it is inadequately anchored within the cavernous bodies of these large dogs – such that the oesophagus at one end and the small intestine at the other are twisted shut. As a result, it becomes massively distended with gas and fluid causing intense pain and leading to death if surgery is not performed urgently. It has been estimated that around 16% of Great Danes die from the condition.

These and many other painful and serious diseases are the result of unwittingly selecting for them. Already on the website we have described over 70 conditions in about 90 breeds of companion animals (dogs, cats, rabbits, pigeons, goldfish), including 54 conditions in 47 breeds of dogs. These problems are now known, so it should be possible in many cases to make them very rare again 'simply' by reversing the process and selecting against them – by breeding from the animals that are not affected (although, in practice this may not always be very simple for various reasons, for example, because breeding strategies may have to take account of several diseases at once).

The role of the UFAW website is to explain the welfare consequences of these diseases to make clear the importance of selecting against them and to highlight any tools and methods that can help with this. To help publicise the website, a poster has been produced and copies of this are now freely available from UFAW.

-ENDS-



Image attached: the UFAW Genetic Welfare Problems poster

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Note to Editors:

The Universities Federation for Animal Welfare (UFAW) is an internationally recognised, independent scientific and educational animal welfare charity. It works to improve knowledge and understanding of animals' needs in order to achieve high standards of welfare for farm, companion, research, captive wild animals and those with which we interact in the wild.

UFAW improves animal welfare worldwide through its programme of awards, grants and scholarships; by educational initiatives, especially at university and college level; by providing information in books, videos, reports and in its scientific journal *Animal Welfare*; by providing expert advice to governments and others, including for legislation and 'best practice' guidelines and codes; and by working with animal keepers, scientists, vets, lawyers and all those who care about animals.

This work relies on the support of members, subscribers and donors.

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