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[Urgent call by vet profession to stop suffering of brachycephalic dogs and cats](#)

by Dr Pete Wedderburn BVM&S CertVR MRCVS on May 9, 2016

The Pug in the photo below may look “cute”, but when you look closely, you’ll see that there’s a dark circle in the centre of his throat. This is a permanent tracheostomy which had to be surgically created because the unfortunate animal was unable to breathe properly through his nose and mouth. He had started to collapse, suffocating, when he went about his normal daily activities. The tracheostomy was needed to stop him from dying a frightening, choking death.



This was not some random illness: this is a man-made problem. Somebody chose to breed him to have a “cute” snub nose and wrinkly face, callously disregarding the fact that this would mean that he would be deprived of normal, wide-open, free-flowing breathing airways. If somebody inflicted the type of suffering that this dog has endured on a healthy adult animal, they would be prosecuted for cruelty. Somehow, because he was born with these problems, the fact that humans chose to create him like this is

conveniently forgotten. Nobody has ever been prosecuted for the cruelty to animals caused by breeding creatures who are born to suffer.

- There are many short-nosed dogs in the UK that are less severely affected than the dog in the photo, but they still live compromised lives.
- They pant incessantly, unable to breathe comfortably through the nose like a normal dog.
- They lick their lips frequently, an “adorable” mannerism which is in fact a sign of anxiety due to discomfort.
- They are unable to exercise normally because they just can’t get enough air into their lungs.
- Obesity is common, due to their restricted activity level
- They have shortened life span .

The saddest aspect about this situation is that it is getting worse: these dogs are increasingly popular. There has been a five-fold increase in the number of Pugs registered by the Kennel Club in the past 11 years, and sales of other short-nosed dogs are also booming. Other short-nosed breeds are also rapidly increasing in popularity, including Bulldogs and French Bulldogs. Vets across the UK treat these dogs every day. Sometimes I can’t hear my client speak because the noise caused by the rasping breathing of her Bulldogs.

We vets know the facts listed above. We attend courses that teach us about more effective ways to help affected animals. We charge healthy fees to give our professional assistance to affected animals. But what are we doing to stop this suffering from happening in the first place?

Last Friday, Jemima Harrison, outspoken critic of unhealthy pedigree dogs, wrote [an open letter to the veterinary profession](#), asking us to take a stronger stance. Vets in other countries, including Norway, Sweden, Ireland and the Netherlands, have joined together to take a public stance against the production of such unhealthy creatures. So why has the veterinary profession in the UK not been more vocal? Vets have responded rapidly. Assisted by VetHelpDirect, [a petition \(for vets and vet nurses only\)](#) was launched this morning, calling on the professional bodies representing vets and dog breeders to take urgent action. If you keep an eye on this petition over the coming days, you will see hundreds of members of the veterinary and veterinary nursing profession signing up. Hundreds of us, all around the country, are distressed by witnessing the daily suffering of their patients, and we want action to be taken. The big question is: are those in power listening?

UPDATE 9th May (Ed)

BSAVA and BVA have provided us with this joint statement

BVA and BSAVA statement on brachycephalic breeds

Following recent calls urging veterinary surgeons and their professional associations to take action to address the health problems experienced by brachycephalic dog and cat breeds, the British Veterinary Association (BVA) and the British Small Animal Veterinary Association (BSAVA) have issued the following statement:

BVA and BSAVA’s members are seeing concerning trends in dog and cat health and welfare linked to the rise in ownership of brachycephalic breeds and we are unequivocal in the need for all those with roles to play – including vets, breeders, breed societies, the pet-buying public as well as others – to take action to combat the health problems that brachycephalic breeds experience due to extreme conformation. Both organisations are committed to using scientific evidence and data – now readily available – to understand

and tackle extremes of conformation. BVA and BSAVA both strongly recommend that animals which show extremes of conformation that negatively affect their health and welfare should not be used for breeding. Vets have a duty to always prioritise the best interests of their pet patients, which, for affected animals, can involve performing surgical procedures to correct conformational disorders. They have a concurrent duty, for example acting through professional associations such as BVA and BSAVA, to be part of initiatives that aim to address the health and welfare of a breed beyond the individual affected animal. This is why BVA, at the recent BSAVA Congress, promoted the importance of vets submitting data on caesarean sections and conformation-altering surgery to the Kennel Club, to improve the future of dog health and welfare. We recognise and take seriously our responsibility to develop and contribute to all such initiatives that aim to address the health and welfare of these animals and we will continue to work with all stakeholders who can positively influence and improve the health and welfare of brachycephalic breeds.

Update 11th May

Statement from the Dog Breeding Reform Group (DBRG)

[The Dog Breeding Reform Group \(DBRG\)](#) has welcomed moves by the veterinary community calling for action to tackle the serious health issues facing brachycephalic breeds. An online petition launched on Monday has already attracted hundreds of signatures.

Chris Laurence MBE, DBRG Trustee and former veterinary director of the Dogs Trust who has signed the petition, says: "Vets in companion animal practice see dogs with inherited breathing difficulty almost every day and are frustrated that there seems to be no end to the daily suffering of these breeds. The DBRG is delighted that vets are now getting together to highlight the issue and to plead with breeders to stop producing puppies with such malformed heads that they are unable to breathe easily."

Dr Rowena Packer from the Royal Veterinary College and also a DBRG member, whose main area of research interest is brachycephalic health, believes the petition is good news. "There is clear evidence that short muzzles are linked with several problems of major welfare concern, including not only breathing but also eye, skin and dental disorders," she says.

"We now need to put this evidence into action and move away from these extreme body shapes for the sake of many thousands of brachycephalic dogs internationally who suffer as a result of their look," she continues.

DBRG's founder Carol Fowler says. "In 2008 Professor Steve Jones, of University College London, talked of a 'universe of suffering' for many dog breeds. Brachycephalic breeds have the additional burden of a conformation that can lead to a lifetime of suffering."

The petition's launch comes days after long-time canine health campaigner Jemima Harrison wrote an open letter to UK vets urging them to put their heads "above the parapet" and make a stand, describing brachycephalic health issues as an "epidemic".

Brachycephalic breeds have experienced a huge surge in popularity. The Kennel Club has seen a five-fold increase in registrations of pugs since 2005 and a whopping 4000 per cent increase in the numbers of French bulldogs.

The PDSA PAW Report, 2015, states that health issues related to pedigree breeding was the third highest concern of owners relating to pet welfare. "Ordinary pet owners and dog lovers can protest as much as they like but few people listen, especially those with the power to instigate change such as breed clubs and the Kennel Club. Now that vets are daring to speak out, I sincerely hope we will start to see real and meaningful change," says DBRG's Carol Fowler.

The DBRG is an organisation dedicated to improving the health and welfare of dogs through responsible breeding. It was founded in 2013 and gained Charitable Trust status in 2015. Members of the DBRG include veterinary specialists, dog welfare law experts, breeders and dog owners.