

DVA Policy paper on breeding of companion animals

The Danish Veterinary Associations (DVA) policy papers are intended to form the basis of views expressed by representatives from DVA on behalf of the Association.

The background

Pedigree dogs and cats have been bred with different characteristics, both in terms of performance, temperament and appearance. This is usually not problematic; but breeding can cause serious welfare problems for the affected animals.

The welfare problems associated with breeding of dogs and cats may be due to two factors. One is selective breeding - where specific race characteristics are being exaggerated. The other is heritable diseases resulting from breeding in relatively small and closed populations.

The veterinarians have an important role in ensuring high animal welfare and health among our population of family pets, as advisors for breeders and potential buyers of kittens and puppies as well as contributors to public debate.

DVAs activities include collaboration with the Danish Ministry of Environment and Food, and other stakeholders to promote the issue of animal welfare, including breeding of dogs and cats.

The aim of healthy breeding

Physical appearance

All breeding of companion must aim to produce individuals with normal physical function, defined as:

- The animal must be able to breathe freely
- The animal must be able to move freely and uninhibited
- The animal must have normal vision and hearing
- The animal must be able to give birth unobstructed
- The animal must have fur and skin quality which do not impair the animal's wellbeing.
- The animal must not require corrective surgery to prevent problems and diseases.

Behavior

All breeding of companion must aim to produce individuals who are able to cope with everyday life. Breeding should not include individuals who are genetically predisposed to be:

- Overly nervous or fearful
- Aggressive towards animals or humans

Diseases

All breeding of companion animals must aim to produce individuals free of hereditary diseases thus the following should be taken into account:

- If any known genetic diseases within a breed, the breeding stock should - when possible be diagnosed free hereof. Concerning diseases that can be diagnosed using DNA tests, it is acceptable to use the healthy carriers if relevant to avoid restriction of the gene pool.

- All breeding should as a minimum follow the Kennel Clubs recommendations concerning screening of diseases. Even if breeding is not intended for pedigree.
- Inbreeding and the use of only a few 'popular' males in breeding should be minimized in order to take care of the population's long-term health.

Measures to promote healthy breeding of companion animals

In order to promote breeding of healthy family pets DVA recommends that following measures are taken:

Animal Welfare Act

The Act can be supplemented by breeding requirements for companion animals such as offspring must be able to move freely, have normal vision, breathe freely, be in good health and be able to give birth unobstructed.

Collecting data on diseases and illness among companion animals,

Healthy breeding require mandatory identification, registered breeding and disease registration. It is important to set up a national disease database in which the veterinarians can do automatically through the electronic record systems and at no extra cost registration. Such a disease database will be able to monitor welfare issues and measure the effect of any actions being taken. When screening for hereditary diseases, it is also important to relate the incidence and risk of developing these diseases to the reduction in the genepool this causes.

Influence the public attitude

Among both professionals and laymen there is a need for increased focus on how selective breeding, gene pool size and inherited diseases exert a negative impact on the welfare of companion animals. When diagnosing or treating diseases with a genetic background, or diseases caused by selective breeding, advice on future breeding of the specific animal should be given. Regarding caesarean sections it is encouraged in each case to evaluate whether the cause is maternal and thus increases the risk of future difficulties in giving birth.

By dialogue and information campaigns DVA together with the authorities and other stakeholders have the opportunity to influence the general attitude towards health, welfare and breeding in companion animals.