

Health before looks

Collaborative action is urgently needed to stop the practice of extreme breeding in dogs and cats

This was the key message emerging from a recent event in the European Parliament, aimed at ending the unnecessary suffering of dogs and cats bred with exaggerated features such as flat faces, narrowed nostrils, skin folds and protruding eyes. The conference – Animal Health and Welfare: Breeding for extremes in dogs and cats – was jointly organised by the EU Dog and Cat Alliance, the Federation of Veterinarians of Europe (FVE) and the Federation of European Companion Animal Veterinary As-

sociations (FECAVA) and hosted by MEPs Petras Auštrevičius and Marlene Mizzi. Auštrevičius, a vice president of the European Parliament's Intergroup on the Welfare and Conservation of Animals, opened the debate saying, "We're used to extreme politics and even extreme politicians, but extreme shouldn't be the case when it comes to breeding dogs and cats". He highlighted that the issue of extreme breeding had been on the

intergroup's agenda "for some time now, because it is indeed a major issue both in Europe and worldwide". The Lithuanian group deputy added that he hoped the event would go some way towards helping to define Europe-wide best practices around "what should be done and what should be avoided".

Via a video message, Marlene Mizzi told participants that, "When it comes to animal welfare, there are no political colours. Whatever your political views, we are here today for a common purpose; to be the voice of

cal problems, severely affecting their health and welfare", she explained, adding that, "A desire to have a cuter cat or dog is understandable but should not come at the expense of the animal itself. The risk of an animal living a painful life for selfish, shallow reasons is, in my view, unacceptable." Echoing Auštrevičius' comments, the Maltese Socialist deputy also called for better guidelines and strategies aimed at strengthening protection. "Common EU legislation can help and protect companion animals from extreme breeding. Animals have rights, animals have their dignity and deserve respect. It is up to us to behave correctly in their regard."

Former FECAVA president Monique Megens highlighted the fact that more than 50 years ago the world's vets declared that breed standards should not include requirements and recommendations that hinder the physiological function of organs or parts of the body. "These words are just as true today as they were 50 years ago, so I'm glad we are all here in the European Parliament to address this urgent topic". She told attendees that the breeding of pets with extreme conformation for a particular look, often to the point of animal suffering, did not necessarily mean that breeders didn't care. "Often, it is a lack of awareness and the fact

that breed related health issues are simply normalised." A well-known example of extreme conformation was the brachycephalic, or flat-faced dog or cat. Dog breeds include the Pug, English Bulldog, French Bulldog, Shih Tzu and Pekinese while the Himalayan, Persian and Scottish Fold are all cat breeds with the condition. "These animals have a flat face and nearly no nose, which many people consider to be cute", said Megens, "but it's not



our innocent, vulnerable and defenceless friends." Also a vice president of the animal welfare intergroup, Mizzi said extreme breeding was "morally questionable" and that consumers rarely considered animal health and welfare factors before acquiring a pet. "Not everybody realises that many dog and cat breeds suffer ill effects from breeding, leading to breathing difficulties, recurring skin infections, eye diseases and spinal or neurologi-



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Petras Auštrevičius MEP

really cute at all, as they end up with a small head with simply too much tissue inside that doesn’t fit properly.”

In 2016, the British Kennel Club became embroiled in a ‘cruel breeding’ row after a German Shepherd dog, with an abnormally sloped back and stooped back legs, won best-of-breed at the world-famous Crufts dog show. “This German Shepherd won first prize in one of the most prestigious dog shows in the world, but it really walked awkwardly and had severe problems in its back and limbs. I think we have now reached limits of extreme design that are unacceptable and causing animal suffering.” Megens also highlighted what she called the “explosive growth in popularity” of certain extreme conformation breeds. UK Kennel Club figures show that over the last 10 years, French Bulldog registrations leapt from under 700 in 2007 to over 30,000 in 2017. The breed also overtook Labradors as the UK’s most popular breed. The Labrador had been number one for over thirty years. “We all know that these numbers are only the tip of the iceberg. In many countries so-called lookalike dogs, from puppy farms or illegally smuggled, are not registered. It’s a complex issue with many factors and many stakeholders involved, but

urgent action is needed, health and welfare must come before looks.”

Another speaker, Kristin Prestrud of the Norwegian Kennel Club explained that while enormous variations remain within the dog species, there are also physiological and functional limits. “We don’t know the exact limitations of how extreme a dog can be. So these need to be properly defined and research in this field is needed.” Within the Kennel Club system, said Prestrud, breeding happens according to written breed standards (written descriptions of how the breed should look) but these are often open

to interpretation. “We love that dogs look cute, that they have some particular look that we love. And so, short legs have got shorter, heavy bodies got heavier, long coats got longer, loose skin got looser, long ears got longer and wrinkles more extended. Not in all cases, not in all breeds, but in several breeds.” And when breeders select really strongly for some traits and restrict genetic input from outside, there is always the risk of reducing genetic variation.

Catherine Dobbie of Dogs Trust focussed her presentation on why there is currently such a high demand for brachycephalic cats and dogs, arguing that their main characteristics, such as wide protruding eyes, domed and flat faces are very childlike and appealing. “Everyone wants to nurture a child and has that desire. So, we have this desire to keep their cute appearance.” Advertisers, filmmakers and social media sites have all helped exacerbate the situation, and celebrities and social influencers aren’t immune to the desire to want one of these dogs. Dobbie said the population of brachycephalic breeds, particularly French Bulldogs had massively shot up over the last few years. “When you have that demand, there aren’t enough ethical breeders to fulfil that hole. So, people will go on social media and buy a dog and →



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pick it up the next day not necessarily considering where that puppy has come from or the health and welfare implications.”

Petra Sindern, of the German Veterinary Practitioners Organisation, outlined several awareness-raising programmes being run in Germany, including a successful letter writing campaign aimed at reducing the use of cats and dogs with exaggerated features in advertising. Sindern also raised the thorny issue of conformation-altering surgery telling attend-

ees, “we must be aware that there are a lot of vets who earn their money by doing this very expensive surgery. So I think it is also very important that we educate our own people.” Rony Doedijns explained how the Dutch Kennel Club had adopted a multi-stakeholder approach around its successful fair breeding plan.

He warned that more than half of new puppies being sold in the Netherlands originated from unsupervised puppy farms, outside the Club’s remit. “We call these puppies lookalikes. They look like pedigree dogs but they are not. Commercial non-compliant breeders step in when a breed gets popular.” For French Bulldogs, Doedijns said the number of non-pedigree dogs was around 90 percent. “Recent studies suggest that most EU countries unfortunately have similar figures,” he

added.
The British Veterinary Association’s Gudrun Ravetz outlined several initiatives being undertaken in the UK aimed at reducing extreme breeding including the encouragement of data reporting of conformational altering surgery. All owners that are Kennel Club-registered give their consent to have any conformational altering surgery or caesareans performed on their pets reported to the Kennel Club. “We cannot have good points of principle authority regulation if we take it to the legal standpoint, without having the evidence behind it,” she said.

In a lively Q&A session British Greens deputy Keith Taylor, one of several MEPs present wondered whether stakeholders and policymakers should somehow think about controlling the marketing of unregistered puppies and kittens, “the majority of which are on the internet and are totally without control.” Fellow British MEP, UKIP deputy Jane Collins suggested that the issue would be hard to legislate on, and that efforts would be better focussed on reducing demand by making extreme breed animals unfashionable. “We have to make unhealthy bad conformation unfashionable, it has to stop. And when you do that, that will affect the public image.” Dogs Trust Ireland Executive Director and Chair of the EU Dog & Cat Alliance Suzie Carley explained that, “With more dogs and cats in our homes than ever before, there is a need for urgent collaborative action across the EU and a tightening of national legislation in order to restrict breeding for extreme conformation”. Veteran animal rights campaigner, German Greens MEP Stefan Eck, went further than most speakers, say-



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ing, “Why should we accept suffering of a creature, of a living being that feels the same as we do? We should ban extreme breeding. We have so many nice companion animals without flat noses.” ★