

Don't tax all dogs
with the same brush!

Brachycephalic Syndrome: “Don’t tar all dogs with the same brush!”

Recently there have been various articles in the dog press on “Brachycephalic Syndrome”. As an owner of various brachycephalic breeds for almost all my life, a former breeder, a judge for most of the affected breeds and a Veterinary Surgeon, I would like to add a different and slightly more down to earth approach to the debate.

Whilst I agree that the condition is complex and the causes for clinical symptoms are multifocal, I do not believe that the current methods of measurement and assessment are adequate to fully explain the nature of the disease and therefore do not seem to be quite suitable to eradicate the problem. It has to be accepted that there is a wide variation of symptoms amongst different breeds. The presumption that a long nose is automatically healthier than a short one grossly simplifies the situation and still has to be proven.

I am surprised that nobody has taken on a research project on this subject using two existing readily available breeds for comparison studies. The Cavalier could be used as the moderate example with the “healthier” long nose and its smaller cousin the short-nosed King Charles Spaniel (“Charlie”) would represent the so called “extreme” brachycephalic version. If the length of the nose has any significant influence on breathing capability surely the King Charles would come out worst. However in real life this is not the case. Most owners and breeders (often keeping both breeds) will confirm that “Charlies” in general do not suffer from more breathing difficulties nor are less capable to cope with heat than Cavaliers.

To verify my point, I vividly can recall childhood memories of various car journeys. Imagine the scenario: A family of four people plus luggage cramped in a VW-Golf on a hot summer’s day, father in the driver’s seat chain-smoking, me and my brother in the back with our pets, a Cavalier and a Charlie next to us. No air-conditions or health and safety concerns in those days and whilst the humans and the Cavalier were sweating and panting away, my little Charlie, ostentatiously undisturbed, was gently snoozing along! Almost 35 years later I still have to find a King Charles suffering from Brachycephalic Syndrome!

Other breeds with very similar skull formation like the Japanese Chin and the Griffon, also do not commonly suffer from the condition.

However Bulldogs, French Bulldogs, Pugs, Boston Terrier and Pekingese, allegedly are more commonly affected by the condition. I personally believe that these breeds have a much higher percentage of dogs with “stenotic nares” (pinched nostrils), which is one of the key-factors of the problem. One does not have to be a vet to make a diagnosis and judges should heavily penalize this serious fault. Other undesirable factors like excessive coat, obesity, impaired mobility; general lack of condition and simple stress must not be

overlooked and have to be considered as part of the problem.

The diagnosis of internal changes (elongated soft palate, excessive tissue in the upper airway and collapsing larynx) usually involves investigation under general anaesthetic. To expect judges at shows to make a diagnosis simply on the breathing ability of a dog seems to be a rather high fetched task and I am not sure that everybody would feel comfortable in coming to an instant verdict. However, common sense and simply living with the dogs should enable any reputable breeder to assess their own stock for breathing difficulties and general fitness, and only asymptomatic healthy dogs should be used for breeding.

A “flat-face” is now highly undesirable in any breed and all standards ask for moderate shortness of muzzle without exaggeration.

Thermoregulation might be easy to measure as a physical parameter, but I seriously doubt that it simply can be used to quantify the quality of life for every dog. For example surely nobody would expect a Pug or French Bulldog to have the same ability to cope with heat as a Saluki or an Afghan. Breeds have been developed, often for many generations for different purposes, and at the end of the day individual dogs have to be “fit for function” in their respective breed. Responsible owners of brachycephalic breeds know that these dogs are not designed to spend a hot summer’s day at the beach or come along jogging, and consequently do not expose their dogs to an environment which does not suit them. This does of course not mean that these dogs should not be able to cope with higher temperature or adequate exercise.

Careful breeding strategies, and a little bit of consideration for their unique features, should enable all brachycephalic breeds to live a normal and happy long life. There are lots of unanswered questions and it will need much more unbiased research work to find all the answers but in the meantime I would plead not to tar all dogs in these breeds with the same brush!

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