ANIMAL WELFARE ISSUES FROM A VETERINARIAN’S PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

The public are becoming increasingly concerned about how animals are treated, but when asked about animal welfare the majority focus on issues related to farm animals and how they are raised. When asked about companion animals the most common concern is for unwanted and stray animals and because of several high profile cases many are aware of dog fighting. However, awareness of the many other welfare issues that occur within the companion animal population is often lacking.

Companion animal welfare issues

The list of companion animal welfare issues is long and includes the obvious issues such as overpopulation, stray populations, animal cruelty, animal fighting and animal hoarding. The focus of this discussion is on breed related welfare problems and controversial procedures such as declawing and tail docking.

A lot of attention is paid to the “human-animal” bond and the common assumption is that due to the elevated status of companion animals in modern western society this is always a positive relationship. However, the welfare of companion animals is not always guaranteed because meeting the animal’s needs and those of the owner may not be compatible. This often puts veterinary professionals in a difficult position because of the conflict between our respect for the client’s autonomy and our duty to the individual animal.

Breeding for extreme traits

There are multiple examples where animals have been bred to exaggerate traits and for fashionable but harmful traits. There is concern for the welfare of brachycephalic cats, and also Munchkin, Ragdoll, “twisty” and werewolf cats. The English bulldog and the Cavalier King Charles Spaniel are two high profile canine breeds where breeding for extremes have created severe welfare problems. Of note is the increased popularity of brachycephalic breeds; the
American Kennel Club registration statistics\textsuperscript{A} show that the French bulldog went from a ranking of 54 in 2003 to 11 in 2013 and the English bulldog has gone from a rank of 16 to 5 over the past 10 years. Many other companion animals have health issues and one good resource for further detailed information is the Universities Federation for Animal Welfare on-line site.\textsuperscript{B}

Breeding for extreme traits is a result of breed standards and conformations that are awarded in the show ring in addition to what appeals to, and is demanded by the public. Breeding to meet human desires, for example a dog’s appearance, often comes at a cost to the animal. Bulldogs are especially popular; many celebrities own bulldogs, the bulldog is also a popular college mascot and usually has a good disposition. Originally the bulldog was bred for a purpose but paintings of this breed from the 1800’s bear little resemblance to today’s bulldog. The health issues that have resulted include severe respiratory issues (“brachycephalic syndrome”), increased risk of heat stress, skin and eye issues, pulmonic stenosis, arthritis and a high incidence of Caesarean sections. The significance of breathlessness as a significant welfare issue has recently been highlighted by Beausoleil and Mellor.\textsuperscript{[1]}

Due to advances in veterinary medicine, we can “fix” or at least ameliorate many of these problems; stenotic nares can be enlarged, elongated soft palates can be shortened and a pulmonic stenosis can be dilated. It can be very challenging to analyze our role in these procedures because we want to help the individual animal who is suffering, we wish to serve the client, but we also have to ask ourselves, are we in fact really acting as enablers and perpetuating these problems?

If we are to address these important welfare issues we need to identify the stakeholders; these include the animal themselves, owners, potential owners, the public, breeders, the kennel club and veterinarians. So, how do we prevent these welfare issues and initiate change?

In 2001 the New York Times featured an article titled “Can the bulldog be saved?”\textsuperscript{C} This article referred to what happened in the United Kingdom after the British Broadcasting Company aired a documentary in 2008 called “Pedigree Dogs Exposed”. The documentary is available for viewing online.\textsuperscript{D} This documentary had a widespread effect in the United Kingdom after it highlighted the welfare issues of several breeds including the English bulldog, Cavalier King Charles Spaniel and Rhodesian Ridgeback. Major sponsors pulled out and the BBC refused to broadcast Crufts, the nation’s largest dog show, which is equivalent to the Westminster dog show in the United States. Following the public’s outrage; a report was commissioned by the kennel club, an investigation was undertaken by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and there was another independent parliamentary inquiry into dog breeding – commonly referred to as the Bateson Report.\textsuperscript{E} This has resulted in several new initiatives, one of which is the United Kingdom’s Kennel Club “Fit for Function Fit For Life” and “Breed Watch” schemes.\textsuperscript{F} Another is stricter veterinary checks at dog shows, which resulted in no dog representing the Pekingese or Bulldog breeds competing in the “best in group” competition at the 2012 Crufts dog show.\textsuperscript{G} Additional efforts have included limiting registration of puppies born by Caesarean section. The Kennel Club have amended their rules to make it a condition of
registration that the owner consents to the reporting of any caesarean operation or other procedure which alters the natural conformation of the dog. Because of this agreement client confidentiality is not breached by veterinary surgeons. These efforts have resulted in improvements in some breed’s conformation, notably the Bulldog but there is a long way to go. The reports and recommendations have been summarized. [2]

Of note are commentaries on these events; Morton[3] stated that “With reference to pure bred dogs….what is of note is that vets have known about these problems for years, but what did they do? Why did it take a television program to draw attention to the plight of pedigree dogs?” In an earlier publication Arman blamed the Kennel Club and breeders for some extreme traits in dogs but also stated that “veterinarians have also facilitated the progression of this situation and must partake in its resolution”. [4]

There is no doubt that enacting similar changes in the United States will be challenging but we should be encouraged by the progress made in other countries.

**Cosmetic procedures**

Procedures that are still performed in North America include onychectomy, ear cropping, tail docking and debarking. In other countries (e.g. The United Kingdom and European Union Member Countries) these procedures are strictly regulated and are listed as mutilations; these are defined as “procedures which involve interference with the sensitive tissues or bone structures of an animal, other than for the purpose of its medical treatment.”

There is evidence that attitudes to these procedures are changing in North America and the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) has recently updated their policy statements on some of these procedures[4] but they remain to be hotly debated. Because it is not currently possible to nationally legislate against these procedures in the United States it will require concerted effort by many stakeholders and an effective public education campaign if they are to be curtailed. Several professional associations including the AVMA, the American Animal Hospital Association, the American Association of Feline Practitioners and State Veterinary Medical Associations are taking an active role in leading these discussions and publishing related policy statements.

Veterinarians are highly regarded by the public and they assume we will always do what is best for animals. We, as a profession are qualified to make animal welfare assessments and we should closely review the science and ethics related to many companion animal welfare issues and reconsider what really is in the best interest of the animals we care for.

**References**

A - American kennel Club registration statistics: https://www.akc.org/reg/dogreg_stats.cfm