

Reports and Comments

Genetic welfare problems of companion animals: an information resource for prospective pet owners and breeders

The genetic health of companion animals has been a 'hot topic' in recent years, since the screening of the documentary 'Pedigree Dogs Exposed' on BBC television in August 2008. This programme alleged that many breeds of pedigree dogs were unhealthy and suffered from significant health and welfare problems caused by extensive inbreeding — a view that has attracted much support. This programme built on previous reports by the Companion Animal Welfare Council on the subject (CAWC 2006, 2008).

Subsequently, four further reports were published addressing the subject (APGAW 2009; CAWC 2009; Rooney & Sargan 2009; Bateson 2010). One of the results of these reports and the associated public interest and concern on health issues related to unsuitable breeding — which continues to be a top welfare concern of veterinarians and vet nurses (PDSA 2011) — was the formation of an independent Advisory Council on the Welfare Issues of Dog Breeding (<http://dogadvisorycouncil.org.uk/>).

Another was that there was a need to better educate and inform the public, both breeders and present and prospective pet owners, on the health and welfare of their animals. To address this, UFAW has launched a website that aims to provide clear information about the welfare consequences of hereditary problems in different breeds — not only for dogs but cats, rabbits and others too. The hope is that this will assist responsible breeders in efforts to avoid or tackle genetic health problems in their breed and allow prospective pet owners to better decide which species, breed or strain to choose, and allow them to ask the right questions when obtaining their pet so as to avoid unintentionally perpetuating known genetic problems.

A 'work in progress', the website features information on a range of conditions in individual breeds and details on the clinical and pathological effects of these conditions, the intensity and duration of their welfare impacts, the number of animals affected, diagnosis and genetics of the condition, how to know whether an animal is a carrier of the condition or likely to be affected and the methods and prospects for its elimination. At present, amongst the conditions addressed on the site are: brachycephalic airways obstruction syndrome, mitral valve disease, gastric dilatation-volvulus syndrome, hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, dermoid sinus and 'bubble-eye' in, variously, English bulldogs, Boston terriers, Pugs, Cavalier King Charles spaniels, Great Danes, Maine Coons, Rhodesian Ridgebacks and goldfish. Non-inclusion of a breed or condition at this time does not necessarily mean that the condition is not a problem or that the breed has no genetic disorders.

More conditions and breeds are being added on a regular basis and the aim is to feature all conditions of major welfare concern.

Genetic Welfare Problems of Companion Animals: An Information Resource for Prospective Pet Owners and Breeders (2011). UFAW web resource. Available at: <http://www.ufaw.org.uk/geneticwelfareproblems.php>.

References

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Bateson P 2010 *Independent Inquiry into Dog Breeding* pp 69. University of Cambridge, UK. Available at <http://www.dogbreedinginquiry.com>

CAWC 2006 *Breeding and Welfare in Companion Animals: The Companion Animal Welfare Council's Report on Welfare Aspects of Modifications, Through Selective Breeding or Biotechnological Methods, to the Form, Function, or Behaviour of Companion Animals* pp 84. CAWC, UK. Available at: www.cawc.org.uk

CAWC 2008 Approaches to tackling genetic welfare problems in companion animals. *Report of the Companion Animal Welfare Council Workshop* pp 7. 9 October 2008 Westminster, UK. Available at: www.cawc.org.uk

CAWC 2009 Towards an independent advisory body on tackling genetic welfare problems in companion animals? *Report of the Companion Animal Welfare Council Workshop* pp 5. 17 February 2009, The British Veterinary Association, London, UK. Available at: www.cawc.org.uk

PDSA 2011 *Animal Well-being Report* pp 40. PDSA: London, UK. Available at: www.pdsa.org.uk/pawreport

Rooney N and Sargan D 2009 *Pedigree Dog Breeding in the UK: A Major Welfare Concern?* pp 76. RSPCA: Horsham, UK. Available at: <http://www.rspca.org.uk/ImageLocator/LocateAsset?asset=document&assetId=1232712491490&mode=prd>

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Lameness in sheep: UK Farm Animal Welfare Council Opinion

The UK Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC) last considered the welfare of sheep in 1994 when it reviewed the industry as a whole and published a 40-page report that included 69 recommendations for improving welfare. These covered: shepherding, training, health and disease, mutilations, identification and unfit sheep. Lameness was recognised as a common welfare problem in the 1994 report and the recent Opinion focuses specifically on this issue. It is widely accepted that lameness causes pain and it is estimated that at any one time in the UK, approximately three million sheep are lame (in 2008 the UK herd comprised of 15.6 million breeding ewes and 16.5 million lambs).

It is noted within the Opinion that although shepherds generally recognise even mild lameness, this does not always lead to treatment. The FAWC notes that: "Some treat the first mildly lame sheep in a group whilst others wait until several sheep are quite lame before catching and inspecting them. Some farmers never catch and treat individual lame sheep but wait until the flock is gathered: this is unacceptable". Additionally, shepherds may not correctly identify the cause of the lameness and may use the incorrect terminology — which is a cause for concern if this results in the wrong treatment.

The Opinion mentions various conditions that cause lameness including: contagious ovine digital dermatitis, white line disease, granulomas, foot abscesses, inter-digital fibromas, polyarthritis and trauma. However, the vast majority of lameness in the UK is caused by the condition commonly known as footrot. This is a bacterial infection with *Dichelobacter nodosus*, which causes interdigital dermatitis and which can progress to separation of the hoof horn from the corium. The Opinion focuses on footrot and provides advice both on individual treatment and the management of the flock as a whole. FAWC stresses that feet should not be unnecessarily, routinely trimmed (it can do more harm than good) except where re-shaping is needed.

The Opinion recommends that the UK's Code of Recommendations on Lameness in Sheep should be updated; that the government should work with industry to develop a national strategy to reduce lameness; that the prevalence of lameness in flocks in Great Britain should be reduced to 2% or less within 10 years; and that further research is required into various aspects of lameness, including the causes, management and prevention of footrot.

FAWC Opinion on Lameness in Sheep (March 2011). A4, 13 pages. Published by the Farm Animal Welfare Council. Available for download from the FAWC website: <http://www.fawc.org.uk/opinions/index.htm>.

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Mutilations and environmental enrichment in piglets and growing pigs: UK Farm Animal Welfare Council Opinion

In the UK approximately nine million piglets are born annually and the majority of these animals experience one or more of the following procedures: castration; tooth clipping or grinding; tail docking; ear notching; ear tagging; tattooing; micro-chipping and slap marking. These procedures are considered mutilations. Under The Animal Welfare Act 2006 (England and Wales), and the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006, a mutilation is a prohibited procedure which interferes with the sensitive tissues or bone structure of an animal and which is carried out for a purpose other than medical treatment. However, the mutilations listed above are permissible by law since they are listed in The Mutilations (Permitted Procedures) (England) Regulations 2007 (there is comparable legislation in Wales and Scotland).

Mutilations permitted under these regulations are generally those which have traditionally been carried out for management and husbandry purposes and are considered to benefit the welfare of an animal in the long-term, when weighed against the short-term pain or stress experienced during the procedure.

The UK Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC) has recently published an Opinion on mutilations in pigs (see details below). This describes why and how each mutilation may be carried out on piglets, or growing pigs, and recognises that some of the mutilations are currently considered necessary by the pig industry (eg tail docking to prevent outbreaks of tail biting) and that some are required by law (eg slap marking for identification purposes). However, ideally, no mutilations would be carried out on any pig and the emphasis of the report is on how all stakeholders may work together to reduce or avoid mutilations where possible and, where they are still necessary, to refine procedures so as to minimise any pain or distress caused.

Nine conclusions are drawn and thirteen recommendations made. Surveillance is needed to help farmers avoid the need for mutilations, eg by identifying risk factors. There is a need for the food chain to support the efforts of farmers and Government towards eliminating the need for mutilations, and improved Government guidelines are needed on enrichment for piglets and growing pigs so as to avoid any uncertainties regarding interpretation of the legislation. Actions recommended by the FAWC include: the involvement of breeding companies in efforts towards minimising the need for mutilations, eg by incorporating appropriate behavioural measures in breeding indices; further research into optimal methods of analgesia when mutilations are required; and the formation of a Tail Docking Action Group to find further ways to make progress.

As of the 1st April 2011, the Farm Animal Welfare Council is no longer a Non-Departmental Public Body (following the Government's Review of Arm's Length Bodies) but is an expert committee within the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) under a new title: The Farm Animal Welfare Committee. For over thirty years the Farm Animal Welfare Council has provided independent advice to Governments in the United Kingdom on subjects it believes to be of importance to farm animal welfare. It is envisaged that FAWC's role will remain unchanged and that it will continue to offer independent advice to Defra, the Scottish Department for Rural Affairs and the Environment and the Welsh Assembly Government's Department for Rural Affairs.

FAWC Opinion on Mutilations and Environmental Enrichment in Piglets and Growing Pigs (March 2011). A4, 15 pages. Published by the Farm Animal Welfare Council. Available for download from the FAWC website: <http://www.fawc.org.uk/opinions/index.htm>.

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