

# Taking a Stand – how the profession and the industry can make big changes to animal welfare

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# Conflict of Interest Disclosure:

I have financial interest, arrangement or affiliation with:

<b>Name of Organisation</b>	<b>Relationship</b>
Valley Vets	Member of sub-group working on brachy policy (unpaid).
Vimian Group	Welfare and ethics freelance consultant.
RWAF	Patron, writer, advisor and proofreader for charity magazine.

# Moral injury and ethical conflict

- Many vets in practice feel overwhelmed and feel that they are simply picking up the pieces of breed-related disease.
- Retention in the profession is a global issue.
- Vets feel they are alone or can't speak out – has corporate takeover made this worse?
- Individual vets often feel that they are too insignificant to make a wider difference.

81 SUPPORTING ORGANISATIONS AND PRACTICES

## VETS AGAINST BRACHYCEPHALISM

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Photographs of brachycephalic animals superimposed onto normal animals show just how much we have shortened their faces.

### Why are we here?

Brachycephalic means short-faced and it is selected for in certain breeds of animals, most notably dogs, cats and rabbits. It is completely unnatural and as we have bred animals to have shorter and shorter faces we have caused a huge array of problems, deformities and disease. Dogs such as French and English bulldogs, pugs and Pekingese and cats like the Persian and Exotic shorthair have become more extremely brachycephalic in the last few decades.

The consequences of breeding for a shorter face are many, most notably that of BOAS. This is brachycephalic obstructive airway syndrome. These animals can have a variety of problems contributing to their breathing problems such as narrow nostrils, excessive soft tissue in the mouth and throat like the soft palate and relatively large tongues and they also tend to have very narrow tracheas (windpipes) compared to normal animals of a similar size.



# Taking a stand – three examples of change

- Three very different organisations and three different ways to make a change to animal welfare;
- **Practice policy regarding assisted fertility services for brachycephalic animals.**
  - **Dave Deane at Valley Vets** in Cardiff, Wales
- **Company-wide animal welfare policy.**
  - **Vimian Group** – a global animal health company covering: Specialty Pharma (Nextmune), MedTech (Movora), Veterinary Services (VetFamily) and Diagnostics (Indical Bioscience).
- **Overhaul of all images in all communications, including advertising.**
  - **RWAF** – Rabbit Welfare Association and Fund. UK charity with global readership and reach.

# Dave Deane and Valley Vets

- Last 15 years huge increase in demand for brachycephalic dogs, notably
  - French bulldogs (most popular breed UK, US and other EU countries)
  - Bulldogs
  - Pugs
- One Friday evening surgery...
  - Already demoralised with exponential demand
  - English bulldog with existing BOAS presented for pre-mate advice and testing
  - Dave declined on ethical grounds
  - Colleague performed tests to keep client happy
  - Triggered practice discussions and policy formulation



# WHAT IS OUR POLICY?

- Our clinical team have taken the decision not to help promote the future breeding of any brachycephalic dogs - dogs with flattened faces / short muzzles such as the French bulldog, Pug and English bulldog.
- Our decision will be reconsidered once the Kennel Club and Brachycephalic Working Group\* have reviewed current breed standards and implemented changes to develop better breed health.



# WHAT IS OUR POLICY?

**In practical terms, it means that:-**

- we no longer offer pre-mate tests for brachycephalic bitches
- we no longer treat infertility in brachycephalic breeds
- our team will strongly advise prospective pet parents against the purchase of brachycephalic puppies
- we will not use, or condone the use of, brachycephalic breeds in any form of advertising

<https://www.valleyvets.net/advice/brachycephalic-dog-breeding-our-position-statement-december-17>



## WHAT IS OUR POLICY?

However, a brachycephalic puppy, or dog, that is already owned and loved by a pet parent will be afforded all the veterinary care and loving attention he, or she, needs and deserves. We will most certainly not discriminate against any canine patient.



# POTENTIAL BARRIERS

- **Speaking out is scary**
- **Hard even talking to friends** (*most my friends and family roll their eyes when I even mention the word Brachycephalic*)
- **Worry about upsetting clients** (*often ones that you may know very well*)
- **Potential pressure from management** – income loss – (*as they sadly do bring in a lot of revenue to the clinic*)
- **Conspiracy theory that vets encourage them** (*or don't discourage them enough*)
- **When the tides turn** – we want to know we have done all we can

# Hindsight and reflection

- Use Social Media more to highlight the position statement.
- Do more to promote the policy via posters and video screens in our branch waiting rooms, to open the conversation.
- Revisit the policy more regularly.
- Ensure new members of staff are aware of it and it is still relevant.
- Now in discussions with corporate owner ethics committee regarding potential roll-out.



# Vimian Group

- Relatively young company
  - no legacy restrictions
  - free reign to implement a company-wide animal welfare policy.
- Policy Team
  - Ellen Broström
    - Vimian Group sustainability manager
  - Dr Dan Brown
    - Global Med. Ed. & Scientific Advisory Board Director at Movora
  - Dr Emma Milne
    - ethics and welfare consultant.
- Policy goals
  - to be robust and far-reaching
  - include ethics and welfare in all aspects of the group's work from marketing to education to supporting staff with ethical dilemmas or conflict.
- Animal welfare email resource
  - for all employees to contact with any concerns.

## Beyond the five basic needs of welfare

In order for animals to live a great life they have five essential needs<sup>1</sup>. At Vimian we strive to meet, and also go beyond the basic needs with the aim for animals to live the best life possible. We believe that knowledge of animals' needs is fundamental to responsible choices when it comes to pets, livestock and poultry and that thought should always be given as to whether these needs can be fully met.

Therefore, Vimian is committed to promote practical suggestions for how gold standard care can be achieved, and embedding it in our ways of working, foremost the areas most significant to us:

/ Veterinary education

/ Clinical practice

/ Marketing and communication

/ One Health

/ Laboratory testing and clinical trials

<sup>1</sup> All five needs are essential for animals to live a great life

### Physical health

1. Healthy diet and fresh water
2. Suitable environment
3. Protection from pain, injury and disease

### Mental health

4. Suitable companionship
5. Express natural behaviour

# Vimian Group – veterinary education



 Movora

**Animal welfare first**  
Supporting animals to live the best life possible, physically and mentally

We aim to support and facilitate open discussions for veterinarians in ethical decision-making, since it is a topic that can be sensitive and a burden for veterinarians to carry alone, [animalwelfare@vimian.com](mailto:animalwelfare@vimian.com).

Unleashing the best veterinary outcomes. Together.




 Movora


**Animal welfare first**  
Just because we can, does it mean we should?

Decision-making for animal welfare

- Will the procedure improve the animal's quality of life?
- Is the recovery period acceptable with remaining life expectancy?
- Are there comorbidities that I should consider?
- Am I qualified to give this animal the best outcome possible?

Unleashing the best veterinary outcomes. Together.



 Movora

**Animal welfare first**  
Supporting both animals and vets.

We understand that many veterinarians feel conflicted on a daily basis by ethical dilemmas. We offer support and the opportunity to voice concerns, [animalwelfare@vimian.com](mailto:animalwelfare@vimian.com).

Unleashing the best veterinary outcomes. Together.



 Movora

**Animal welfare first**  
Just because we can, does it mean we should?

Ethical decision-making to us is the consideration of the quality of life for the animal pre-, peri- and post-operatively.

Unleashing the best veterinary outcomes. Together.

# Vimian Group - marketing and communications

A picture is worth a thousand words – that's why they are so important.



Animal welfare and ethics in marketing

## The (unintentional) risks of using the wrong animal pictures

- ▶ Demand for unhealthy body shapes
- ▶ Acceptance of mutilations
- ▶ Dangerous interactions
- ▶ Poor practice e.g., stick throwing for dogs
- ▶ Poor husbandry e.g., barren enclosures for small mammals.
- ▶ Behavioral needs
- ▶ Social needs

**We have the opportunity to use powerful subliminal messaging that promotes healthy and happy lives for animals.**



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# Vimian Group – marketing and communications

## 1. The need for a healthy diet and fresh water

### Things to consider

- Review the body condition and coat of the animals.
- Do they look well-nourished and in good condition?
- Are they obese or underweight?
- Is food in the image appropriate?



Correct weight, healthy coat.



Correct weight, healthy coat.



Inappropriate food in image.



Overweight.

Source: authors and others in marketing.



Page 1

## 2. The need for a suitable environment

### Things to consider

- Review the environment as well as the animal(s).
- Does the husbandry look appropriate?
- Is there anything dangerous or inappropriate in the background?



Poor bedding.



Dirty, soiled, smelly hutch even though animals look healthy.



Safety hazards - plastic healthy and human medication in background.

Source: authors and others in marketing.

## 3. The need to be protected from pain, injury and disease.

- Do they look well?
- Unhealthy body shapes and extreme conformation.
- Mutilations.
- Aversive devices.

### Unhealthy body shapes eg;

- Short muzzle.
- Heavy skin folds anywhere on body or head.
- Drooping eyes.
- Long back and short legs.
- Excessively long ears, folded ears or lops (rabbits).
- No hairless varieties of any animals.
- Excessively long hair – all species.

### Mutilations:

- No docked dogs even if exempt breed by law.
- No cropped ears.
- No declawed cats.

### Aversive devices:

- Choke chains.
- Prong collars.
- Electric shock collars.

Source: authors and others in marketing.



Page 2

## 3. The need to be protected from pain, injury and disease – mutilations and aversive devices



Mutilations

- Tail docking
- Ear cropping
- Declawing



Aversive Devices

- Prong collars
- E-collars
- Choke chains
- Whips and strops



Source: authors and others in marketing.

Page 3

## 5. The need to express natural behaviour – prey animals

- Prey animals do not like being;
- Restrained/unable to escape.
  - On their back.
  - Lifted up/off the floor.
  - Held in the air.
  - Alone (social species, discussed earlier).



Prey animals being lifted and held in the air or placed on their back. Remember, cats, like us, are prey as well as predators.

# 5. The need to **express natural behaviour** – human <=> animal interaction

## Things to consider

*Note that many animals find close physical contact with humans very threatening*

- Does the animal have a **choice**?
- Did they **consent** to this activity?
- Does the animal have the chance to **control** what is happening?

Look for;

- Leaning away or looking away.
- Whites of eyes/eye roll.
- Lip-licking.
- Yawning.
- Ears back.
- Tense face.



Whites of eyes/eye roll, lip-licking.



Tense, staring faces, ears back, looking away,



Ears back, whites of eyes showing/eye roll.



Tense, staring face, ears back, hands from two people preventing escape.



## 5. The need to express natural behaviour

### Things to consider

- Is the behavior natural for the animal?
- Does the animal look tense or relaxed?

The human-animal bond is very important, especially in marketing but it can be shown in really positive ways.



Passive interactions between humans and animals. Relaxed animals, seeking contact themselves.



Relaxed, social group of horses.



Mutual grooming – a natural behaviour.



Friendly, social interaction.

# Vimian Group

- Welfare email address will remain
  - team can generally respond within hours to most enquiries.
- Annual reviews
  - policy
  - training materials.
- Feb 2024 - Month of Ethics at Vimian
  - marketing and comms training will be updated and repeated.
- Annual refresher training



# RWAF

- RWAF
  - one of the most trusted, global sources of advice on rabbit care and best practice.
  - RWF is the charitable arm which relies solely on donations.
- Rabbiting On
  - Member magazine for RWAF is a huge source of images, along with their website, and raises funds from subscriptions and advertising. All surplus goes to RWF.
- We hosted an all-day ethics and welfare conference devoted to rabbits in 2021.



# RWAF ethics and welfare day

- The same findings came up time and again.
- Around 1.5 million pet rabbits in the UK.
- One of the most misunderstood and neglected species with respect to basic welfare needs.
- Often housed alone, no freedom of choice for outside access and exercise and little to no opportunity to exhibit natural behaviour.
- Inappropriate diet.
- At least *half* of them affected by extreme conformation – brachycephaly and/or lop ears.
- Pledged after findings of the ethics day to totally overhaul all images used in all communications, including advertising.

9.00-9.30	Introduction	Dr Emma Milne
9.30-10.00	Brachycephaly; prevalence, consequences, welfare impact. What can be done?	Dr Richard Saunders
10.00-10.30	What is the ideal rabbit diet?	Dr Nadene Stapleton
10.30-11.00	Showing and show jumping. Is it ethical?	Dr Emma Milne
11.00-11.30	Coffee	
11.30-12.00	'There's no place like home'. Rabbit housing in the 21st century.	Dr Jane Tyson
12.00-12.30	The rise of 'Rabbit Friendly' practices, how can we ensure that the rabbits needs at home are being met?	Nina Downing PDSA
12.30-13.00	Rabbit Welfare Strategy and Best Practice Guidelines RSPCA & RWAF	
13.00-14.00	Lunch	
14.00-14.30	Prioritising welfare needs, identified by research at Bristol University / RSPCA	Dr Nicola Rooney
14.30-15.00	"Morbidity and mortality of domestic rabbits under primary veterinary care in England" Why are we failing them and what can be done?	Dr Dan O'Neill
15.00-15.30	"What Makes a rabbit cute? Preference for rabbit faces differs according to skull morphology and demographic factors" How can we change this?	Dr Naomi Harvey
15.30-15.45	Coffee	
15.45-16.15	Exploring other extreme anatomical features and the welfare impact for the rabbit	Dr Emma Milne
16.15-17.00	Discussion and action planning	All
17.00-17.30	Summary and close	Dr Emma Milne

# RWAF

Examples of previous images.



Examples of recent images.

RWAF has also started commissioning best practice photos of healthy rabbits to address the gross lack of such images.

# From small beginnings...

- Dave and his practice have inspired many other vets to feel that they can also stand behind this totally defensible and ethically correct policy statement.
- If there is corporate roll out this could end up being policy in hundreds of practices across the UK and Europe.
- His speaking at events and other practices reaches even more vets globally.
- In 2022 alone, the Vimian Group trained over 11,000 vets and surgeons and their marketing and communications are seen all over the world.
- Every one of their employees now has the chance to speak confidentially about ethical conflicts and concerns, or simply check if an image is suitable for use.
- The RWAF website gets around 60,000 hits a month and is generally held to be one of the most reliable and trusted sources of rabbit care advice.
- Rabbiting On magazine reaches another 8000 people a quarter. The images they use have a huge subliminal effect on demand.
- So, these things may seem like small, insignificant steps for the individual organisations, but the wider impact can be absolutely huge. If we can change the perception in people's minds about what is normal or acceptable when it comes to unhealthy and dysfunctional body shapes, and the welfare impact of poor handling and mutilations then we, by default, promote healthy, happy pets equipped to lead their best lives.

Thank you.

