



# **Position Statement on Breeding for Extreme Conformation (Companion animals)**





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## Abstract:

The breeding of companion animals for extreme physical conformations, prioritising aesthetic preferences over animal welfare, has led to significant health complications and long-term suffering. These breeding practices often result in serious medical conditions, which require ongoing veterinary care and may contribute to elevated healthcare costs. Despite increasing awareness of these issues, there remains a notable gap in knowledge among pet owners and breeders regarding the potential risks associated with extreme conformation.

The International Veterinary Students' Association's Standing Committee on Animal Welfare (IVSA SCAW) strongly condemns extreme breeding practices, highlighting the ethical and welfare concerns associated with such methods. This position statement provides an overview of the consequences of extreme breeding, reviews existing regulatory frameworks, and identifies areas where current regulations may be insufficient. It also advocates for enhanced regulation, stronger enforcement, and greater industry accountability.

In addition, this statement stresses the importance of education and awareness for pet owners, breeders, and veterinary professionals. It calls for a shift towards breeding practices that prioritise the health and well-being of companion animals, in line with established animal welfare principles.

IVSA SCAW calls for immediate, coordinated efforts to improve the welfare of companion animals by addressing gaps in knowledge, regulation, and practice. By fostering a greater understanding of animal welfare principles, promoting responsible breeding practices, and advocating for regulatory reform, the aim is to reduce preventable suffering in companion animals. Ultimately, this position statement seeks to encourage a more scientifically informed





approach to breeding that places the health of animals above aesthetic considerations, fostering a culture of responsibility and accountability within the industry.





## Introduction:

The International Veterinary Students' Association (IVSA) is a non-profit, non-governmental organisation that serves as a global platform to unite veterinary students worldwide. As the largest veterinary student association, representing over 70 Member Organisations (countries), IVSA aims to benefit both animals and people globally by harnessing the potential and dedication of veterinary students to promote the international application of veterinary skills, education, and knowledge.

This position statement addresses the pressing ethical and welfare concerns surrounding extreme confirmations in companion animal breeding. By advocating for responsible breeding practices that prioritise animal health and well-being, this statement seeks to protect the dignity and welfare of companion animals and promote a shift towards welfare-centric breeding.

Within IVSA, the Standing Committee on Animal Welfare (SCAW) is dedicated to elevating global animal welfare standards by actively engaging veterinary students and professionals. Our mission is to involve all veterinary students worldwide in raising awareness and education about animal welfare and striving towards a world where animal welfare is upheld to the highest standards, fostering harmony between animals and humans while preserving the environment.





## Background:

Extreme conformation refers to physical traits in animals that result from selective breeding for exaggerated anatomical features, which can negatively impact health and welfare. Brachycephalic breeds, such as Bulldogs, Boxers, and Persian cats, are selectively bred for short muzzles and underbites, which are linked to a range of health issues, including ocular diseases, respiratory difficulties, and an increased risk of anaesthesia-related complications due to their altered cranial structure [1]. Similarly, miniature breeds like Poodles, Chihuahuas, and Yorkshire Terriers, bred for their small size and aesthetic appeal, are prone to conditions such as hypoglycemia, heart defects, respiratory issues, and musculoskeletal abnormalities. Breeds such as Pugs and Dachshunds are also predisposed to specific health problems related to their conformational traits, leading to breathing difficulties and musculoskeletal disorders. These practices not only compromise animal health but also result in increased veterinary care costs and raise ethical concerns regarding the prioritisation of appearance over well-being [2,3].

Despite the health challenges associated with extreme conformation, the demand for purebred animals with specific aesthetic traits remains high [4]. This ongoing demand perpetuates breeding practices that prioritise appearance over health, even when these traits are associated with significant physiological problems. For instance, corneal ulcers in dogs with excessive nasal folds highlight the adverse effects of prioritising aesthetics over function. The International Collaborative on Extreme Conformations in Dogs asserts that dogs should exhibit healthy conformation that does not impede their ability to breathe, move, and engage in other essential behaviours without undue effort or medical intervention [5]. Similarly, the Governing Council of the Cat Fancy stresses that breeding





programs should prioritise health, enabling cats to engage in natural behaviours necessary for their physical and mental well-being [6].

The regulation of breeding practices aimed at preventing extreme conformation varies significantly across countries. In Europe, a survey conducted by the Eurogroup for Animals across 19 countries revealed that 12 of these countries have enacted legislation addressing extreme breeding practices. These countries include Austria, Belgium, Finland, Germany, Greece, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. However, despite the existence of these laws, the enforcement of such regulations remains inconsistent, and veterinarians have expressed dissatisfaction with the level of enforcement in some regions [8].

In the United States, state-level regulation of breeding practices involving extreme conformation is fragmented. While the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) oversees commercial pet breeders, individual states have implemented varying levels of regulation. Some states have specific guidelines to protect the welfare of breeding dogs, while others lack comprehensive regulations altogether [9]. In Australia, the regulation of breeding for extreme conformation also varies by state. For example, Queensland's Animal Care and Protection (Code of Practice for Breeding of Dogs) and Other Legislation Amendment Regulation 2017 require veterinary or geneticist approval for breeding dogs with heritable conditions, such as brachycephalic syndrome. In contrast, Victoria's Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1986 prohibits breeding animals with heritable defects but does not specifically include conditions like brachycephaly or Brachycephalic Obstructive Airway Syndrome (BOAS) in its provisions [10].





In many Asian and African countries, there are no specific laws regulating extreme conformation breeding. A survey conducted in several countries, including Bangladesh, China, India, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sudan, and Thailand, found broad agreement that animal welfare laws are important. However, the lack of specific regulations on extreme conformation breeding may be due to cultural factors or differing priorities in these regions. Some authors suggest that harmonising animal welfare laws globally could improve the standard of animal welfare and ensure more consistent protection for animals worldwide [11,12]

## Methodology:

The position statement on extreme breeding conformation developed by the IVSA Standing Committee on Animal Welfare (SCAW) was based on a comprehensive review of existing literature. Relevant information was sourced from reputable academic databases, including PubMed, Google Scholar, ResearchGate, and Elsevier. The review focused on peer-reviewed articles, research papers, guidelines from veterinary associations, and academic journals and books.

A draft policy document was created based on the findings of this review. The draft was then subjected to multiple rounds of review and revision by IVSA Global teams to ensure accuracy, consistency with IVSA's goals and principles, and clarity of presentation. The final position document represents a collaborative effort between IVSA SCAW and IVSA Global teams, reflecting a consensus on the policy recommendations regarding extreme breeding conformation.







## Results

The IVSA Standing Committee on Animal Welfare (SCAW) identified several key findings from the research on extreme conformation breeding, summarised as follows:

### Health Impacts

Extreme breeding practices, particularly in brachycephalic and miniaturised breeds, are associated with a range of health issues, including respiratory difficulties, ocular disorders, musculoskeletal deformities, and other chronic conditions. These health problems contribute to increased veterinary care costs and reduced quality of life for affected animals.

### Legislative Gaps

Existing regulatory frameworks addressing extreme breeding are inconsistent across regions, with notable variations in the scope and enforcement of laws. While some countries have implemented legislation to limit extreme breeding, enforcement practices and regulatory standards are often inadequately applied or lack sufficient coherence.

### Cultural Influences

In many cases, the demand for aesthetically desirable traits in companion animals outweighs concerns regarding animal health. This cultural preference for certain physical characteristics contributes to the perpetuation of breeding practices that prioritise appearance over well-being, despite the associated health risks.





## Call to Action:

IVSA SCAW emphasises the need for a collaborative effort among veterinarians, breeders, pet owners, veterinary organisations, legislators, and researchers to eliminate the breeding of animals with exaggerated physical traits, significantly improving animal welfare. Aligning with the World Small Animal Veterinary Association (WSAVA) and the World Veterinary Association (WVA), IVSA SCAW advocates for breeding practices that prioritise animal health and well-being over extreme physical traits. To achieve this goal, all stakeholders must take immediate and effective action:

1. **Urge veterinarians** to educate and advise breeders and pet owners on the importance of animal health and welfare, particularly regarding the negative health impacts of breeding for exaggerated physical traits;
2. **Encourage breeders** to prioritise animal health and welfare over aesthetics, and to refrain from breeding animals with extreme traits;
3. **Advise pet owners** to avoid purchasing animals with exaggerated physical characteristics and to seek veterinary advice before acquiring a pet;
4. **Implore veterinary organisations** to lead public awareness campaigns that highlight the significant health risks associated with breeding animals with exaggerated physical traits;
5. **Call upon legislators** to enact strict legislation against the breeding of animals with exaggerated physical traits and to establish enforcement mechanisms to ensure compliance;
6. **Urge researchers** to conduct comprehensive studies on the genetic and health implications of exaggerated physical traits and to provide veterinarians with the knowledge necessary for corrective surgical procedures.





## Conclusion:

Breeding for extreme conformation presents significant health and welfare challenges. Extreme breeding practices result in compromised animal health, leading to severe medical conditions that may impose financial burdens on pet owners, as they often cannot afford the associated veterinary care costs.

Despite these welfare concerns, the demand for purebred animals with exaggerated physical traits remains substantial in many regions. In response, some countries have implemented legislation aimed at regulating extreme breeding practices, although enforcement remains a notable challenge. In other countries, such regulations are either limited or nonexistent, further complicating efforts to mitigate the associated welfare risks.

The International Veterinary Students' Association Standing Committee on Animal Welfare (IVSA SCAW) highlights the critical importance of prioritising animal welfare and addressing misconceptions surrounding extreme breeding. By promoting responsible breeding practices and advocating for high standards of animal welfare, it is possible to reduce the prevalence of unnecessary suffering caused by the pursuit of exaggerated physical traits.





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