

BREEDING DISCONTENT



As people who love animals, we hate to see any animal suffer. But unfortunately we have inadvertently created problems for many animals, purely to create a pet that suits our preferences, aesthetics and otherwise.

In some cases, our attempts to create the 'ideal' purebred animal have resulted in breeds being banned because the genetic disorders inherent in the breed simply make it too cruel to perpetuate them.

In 2009, a documentary called *Pedigree Dogs Exposed* showed the problems that arise from breeding for a specific 'look' and using ever decreasing gene pools to maximise the chances of a specific gene responsible for that appearance coming through. The furore that followed was extensive – the iconic Crufts Dog Show stopped being broadcast on the BBC, sponsorships were cancelled and several reports were commissioned.

One independent inquiry was led by Cambridge University Professor Emeritus Sir Patrick Bateson. In his peer-reviewed report he stated:

"To the outsider, it seems incomprehensible that anyone should admire, let alone acquire an animal that has difficulty in breathing or walking. Yet people are passionate about owning and breeding animals which they know and love, even though the animals manifestly exhibit serious health and welfare problems... Notwithstanding the motivations of the breeders, the time has surely come for Society as a whole to take a firm grip on the welfare issues that evidently arise in dog breeding."

While that program was based on the UK experience, in Australia we follow the same breed standards which result in exactly the same problems. Even outside the show-ring there seems to be a preference for some of the more exaggerated and extreme physical traits such as excessive skin folds,

extremely shortened and flattened faces, large bulging eyes, very long backs, very short legs and massive heads. These exaggerations can seriously compromise the animal's quality of life.

Richard Malik is Senior Consultant at the Centre for Veterinary Education at the University of Sydney, and says that the problem in Australia is that no-one has embraced the idea of the thriftiness of a cross-breed.

"Basically, you are going to have problems with anything that is a major departure from the standard design model," he said.

Mr Malik's standard design model for a dog is between 15 – 22 kilos, well-proportioned, with a strong constitution and an even temperament.

"Fox Terriers are your quintessential breed – they are a pretty healthy dog. Kelpies and border collies are well proportioned – most of their genetic issues can be bred out. The design model of a Staffordshire terrier isn't bad either, although they have become victims of their own success and can have behavioural problems," he said.

"It's very hard to find a sound small pedigree dog – anything with a squashed face and curly tail is abnormal, as are the giant breeds. Animals that people tend to have a hankering for, that are chic, are generally the worst.

"So many of these problems are tied up with what people find attractive. They don't want healthy, they want something that looks cute, or macho."

And the problems aren't only restricted to dogs. The Scottish Fold cat (featured on the cover of this issue) is an extremely popular breed in Asia, but has been banned in the UK for years and breeding the cats has recently been banned in Victoria, along with Munchkins.

“THEY DON'T WANT HEALTHY, THEY WANT SOMETHING THAT LOOKS CUTE, OR MACHO”

The Scottish Fold breed developed in the 1960s in Scotland when a cat was discovered with forward folding ears. However it was soon discovered that mating two Scottish Folds resulted in cats with shortened, malformed legs, and the gene responsible for the 'cute' ears caused early arthritis. The cartilage in the cat's ear is too weak to maintain a normal shaped ear and Dr Malik says it is hardly surprising that articular cartilage cannot cope with the wear and tear of a typical cat's agile and athletic lifestyle.

"The problem with Scottish Fold cats is akin to that which affects many dog breeds which are genetic mutants. In other words, it is impossible to have a cat with folded ears that has sound joints," said Dr Malik.

Overall cats do not suffer the same amount of inherited problems as dogs because they are generally a uniform shape and mostly choose their own partners, widening the gene pool. But again any deviation from the standard can cause problems: the squashed in faces of Persians create breathing problems and the defining Manx tail deformity can often cause neurological abnormalities.

Dr Malik does not blame the breeders for these problems.

"I think they genuinely love their animals. I have yet to meet someone who has become rich from breeding. Overall breeders will help to eliminate the genetic problems in their breeds, if only they would be given and then take on board the correct advice."

The RSPCA has been agitating for a fundamental shift in the way purebred dogs are selected and bred in Australia. It would like to see breeders put health, welfare and functionality ahead of the appearance of pedigree dogs, which involves acknowledging the health and welfare problems in each breed and reviewing and revising breed standards.

As small gene pools are the cause of many breed issues, the RSPCA would like the Australia National Kennel Council to prohibit the registration of first and second degree matings, to open studbooks and outcross (with another breed) then backcross where necessary to increase the genetic diversity within particular breeds.

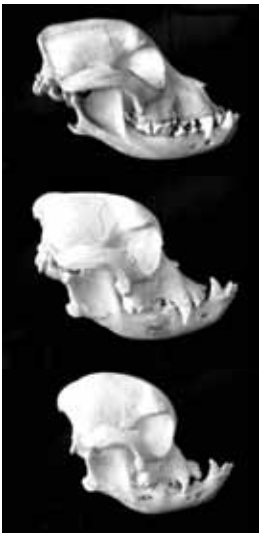
So the big question is: are cross-breeds better dogs than purebreds? The science tells us that dogs that are the result of matings between unrelated animals have a fitness advantage due to their genetic diversity and hybrid vigour, and they are more resistant to both infectious and genetic disease.

Perhaps the best indicator that mixed breeds are generally healthier is that it's more expensive to purchase pet insurance for a purebred dog, because the average vet bills for pedigree breeds are much higher than for crossbreeds.

Dr Malik has one possible solution.

"I think it would be great if someone with a lot of influence would highlight the dogs you find in Aboriginal communities. These animals have a wide gene pool, are well socialised, selected for a good temperament are around 18 kilos and the right shape and size. Even though vaccinations are quite rare in those communities, the dogs often seem healthy especially if vets provide good external parasite control."

"In short, those dogs are bred for all the right things. Wouldn't it would be great if we could find a way for city folk to have them as pets?"



These skulls of Bulldogs show how much the breed's conformation changed in the last century. The first skull is around 1900, the second 1971 and the third 1993. Photos (c) Natural History Museum Bern.



The breeding of Scottish Fold Cats was banned in the UK after the degree of genetic mutation was deemed cruel.

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HOW TO FIND A HEALTHY PUREBRED PET

- Research the breed. Learn about what disorders your chosen breed may be prone to, as well as what genetic tests are available.
- Visit your local RSPCA shelter. Shelter staff know breeds and will be honest about the pros and cons of each. Their aim is to find you a great pet that matches your lifestyle, and will give you tips on any health issues to expect.
- Choose a responsible breeder. A good breeder has nothing to hide – you'll be able to see where the animals are bred, how they are socialised and papers showing the animal's heritage and any genetic screening. And they will ask you as many questions as you ask them because they want to be sure their animal is going to a good home.
- Consider an older dog. It is often easier to assess the health and temperament of a mature companion as any unsociable behaviours and health issues would generally have come out – plus they are usually housetrained.

PROBLEMS TO WATCH OUT FOR

Many of the most popular breeds in Australia have known genetic problems stemming from small gene pools and breeders attempts to strictly adhere to breed standards and meet buyer's preferences. Here are a few examples:

Cavalier King Charles Spaniel: Syringomyelia is a devastating and painful disease caused by the dog's skull being too small for its brain. They can also be susceptible to the early development of degeneration of the heart valves.

Pugs and Pekinese can have such serious breathing problems that they may faint or collapse due to a lack of oxygen (especially when exercising or if they get excited). Given that Pugs are the seventh most popular 'registered' breed in this country, this is a significant welfare problem. Most benefit by early surgery on the soft palate and nostrils – but should we be breeding dogs that routinely need surgery to breathe properly?

Breathing problems have also been reported in English Bulldogs in Australia. Plus, in most cases this breed in Australia cannot give birth naturally because they have been bred to have large heads, broad shoulders and narrow pelvis. The puppies heads are simply too large to move through their mother's pelvises. These dogs typically require a caesarean section and general anaesthesia to be able to give birth.

Dachshunds are predisposed to spinal problems, not only due to their excessively long spinal column and excessively short legs but also because they have abnormal cartilage that can lead to ruptured discs. The disc prolapses and puts direct pressure on the spinal cord, causing extreme pain and potential neurological problems. Many Dachshunds require expensive remedial spinal surgery to address this problem.

Boxers in Australia are also predisposed toward developing certain cancers and are predisposed to certain unique infectious diseases. A predisposition toward heart problems has also been documented.