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How is agony breeding perceived by Veterinary Medicine students? A preliminary study

Giulia Rubini*, Eleonora Nannoni, Luca Sardi, Lisa Stefani, Giovanna Martelli

Agony breeding has been defined as “breeding dogs and cats in a way that fosters/tolerates characteristics that may cause the animals pain, discomfort, and behavioural disorders”. We investigated the awareness of Veterinary Medicine students to agony breeding and how progression throughout veterinary school may modify students’ knowledge and perception. A questionnaire was administered to students enrolled in the first year (1Y), fifth year (5Y), and students who did not graduate within the prescribed time (OPT, Outside Prescribed Time). Descriptive analyses were carried out, pending a second administration of the questionnaire in future academic years. Respondents (119, including 39 1Y, 41 5Y, 38 OPT) were mostly females (88.2%) and prevalently interested in small animal practice (51%). Only 41% of students (26 1Y, 21 5Y, 21 OPT) knew the correct definition of “breed standard”. The large majority was aware of the relationships between breed characteristics and disease prevalence (95%), and of the responsibility of veterinarians in informing owners and breeders about possible health risks associated with certain breeding practices (80%). Most students correctly indicated an inherited component (genetic disease or breed predisposition) in brachycephalic syndrome (29 1Y, 39 5Y, 35 OPT), hip dysplasia (20 1Y, 38 5Y, 34 OPT), polycystic kidney disease (16 1Y, 36 5Y, 34 OPT), progressive retinal atrophy (22 1Y, 28 5Y, 32 OPT), and intervertebral disk herniation (8 1Y, 13 5Y, 14 OPT). The data show that 5Y students have more knowledge about these issues than 1Y students. Most of the mentioned diseases were acknowledged as having a moderate-to-high impact on animal welfare (average score above 3 on a 1-to-5 scale). Knowledge on breed standards and breed-specific diseases may be further improved by providing more detailed courses in veterinary school. Overall, students showed a very positive attitude towards plans to eradicate these diseases and breeding practices.