

Puppy power: fertility clinics on the rise

By Josh Loeb and Eleanor Evans

THERE has been a sharp increase in the number of specialist canine fertility clinics in the UK over the past five years, an analysis by *Vet Record* has revealed.

There are now at least 37 such clinics in operation nationwide.

Many are not run by vets and do not have a vet on site but appear to offer veterinary services such as blood sampling and caesareans. In two cases clinics have advertised canine surgical artificial insemination (AI), a banned procedure (see p 141). There is no evidence that they have performed the procedure since it was banned in 2019.

The boom in clinics has happened at the same time as the number of puppies born following AI has dramatically increased.

In the past three years alone there were more canine AI births than during the entire 17-year period between 1998 and 2015, Kennel Club figures indicate.

The trend has been linked to the rise in the popularity of brachycephalic breeds.

Precise figures for the number of canine fertility clinics are hard to come by. However, a BBC article about dog breeding dating from 2015 described how a canine fertility clinic in Surrey was noteworthy for being one of the only businesses of its kind in operation in the UK at that time. Five years on, an extensive trawl of the internet last month revealed that there are now dozens of clinics of this type in operation across the UK.

Some are recognisably veterinary clinics based at a fixed location and with vets on site, but others are mobile businesses, have rudimentary websites and offer only an anonymous mobile number as the point of contact.

Of 37 clinics identified by *Vet Record* as specialising in offering canine fertility services, the majority (20) offered a stud dog from breeds with an 80 per cent caesarean rate

(eg, English and French bulldogs, which require a caesarean most of the time in order to give birth). Of these, the majority also did not appear to offer a vet on site as part of their services. However, they would still have the option of hiring a vet to perform surgeries.

Some such clinics appear to advocate 'self whelping' – whereby the bitch is not taken to the vet in order to give birth, even where this might be advisable – as well as raw feeding.

The Royal Veterinary College's Madeleine Campbell, a specialist in reproduction and European diplomate in animal welfare, ethics and law, told *Vet Record*: 'Artificial insemination is, of itself, ethically permissible in many situations. Indeed, it can sometimes have positive welfare effects, for example by removing the need to transport animals over long distances or internationally to breed, or through helping to maintain genetic diversity by facilitating crosses between animals who are geographically remote from each other.

'However, if artificial insemination is being used to achieve pregnancies in animals which for heritable anatomical reasons are not capable of either breeding or giving birth naturally then that has negative welfare implications and is of ethical concern.

'Furthermore, if *Vet Record*'s investigations imply that non-vets may be undertaking acts of veterinary surgery such as caesareans, then that is obviously worrying, and would be illegal.

'The RCVS regulates vets and vet nurses, but it cannot currently regulate those outside of the veterinary professions. Owners need to be educated about who can and cannot legally undertake various reproductive procedures.

'Concerns about non-vets undertaking acts of veterinary surgery should be reported to trading standards and the police.'

Vet and welfare campaigner



The majority of clinics offer a stud dog from a breed with an 80 per cent caesarean rate, such as French bulldogs

“
The rise in the number of fertility clinics is to do with the massive boom in the popularity of brachycephalic breeds

Emma Milne said there had been a boom in the number of canine fertility clinics in recent years and that they were most likely 'cashing in' on the popularity of brachycephalic dogs.

'Personally I think the rise in the number of fertility clinics is to do with the massive boom in the popularity of brachycephalic breeds, with the vast majority being born by caesarean, and where many can't mate naturally [due to an inability to breathe properly]', she said. 'Just look at the Kennel Club registration numbers for bulldogs, pugs and Frenchies, which have been increasing.'

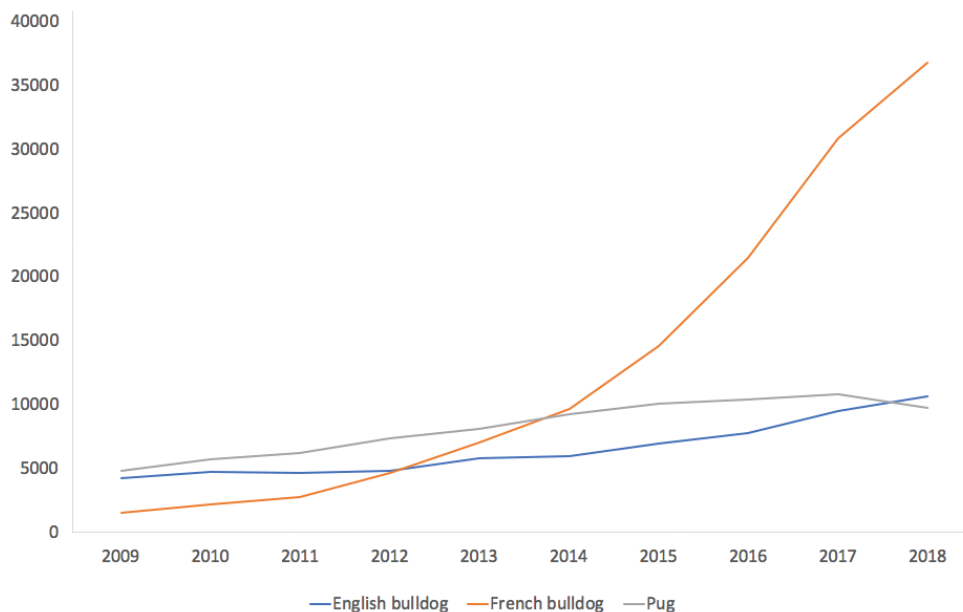
The number of French bulldog and English bulldog puppies registered with the Kennel Club has been increasing year on year for the past 10 years (see graph on p 141). Between 2009 and 2018, there was a 153 per cent increase in the number of English bulldogs registered with the Kennel Club and a 3000+ per cent increase in the number of French bulldogs. By contrast, pug numbers

increased sharply in the first part of that 10-year period, before slowing and then falling slightly.

Kennel Club data also show that in the past three years at least 1604 puppies were born using AI, compared with 1153 during the 17-year period from 1998 to 2015. The number of AI births has also risen year on year (434 in 2017, 577 in 2018 and 593 in 2019). The figures are merely a snapshot of the overall picture, since not all puppies will be registered with the Kennel Club. The true numbers are likely to be far higher.

Last year *Vet Record* reported on concerns about a canine fertility clinic that had for more than a year been advertising the services of a vet who is not on the RCVS register (*VR*, 14 December 2019, vol 185, p 712).

The average start-up costs for a mobile clinic offering microchipping, pregnancy scanning, semen collection, semen analysis, progesterone testing and artificial insemination is estimated at £9070, meaning there is the



Breed statistics from the Kennel Club showing the number of registrations of English bulldogs, French bulldogs and pugs per year

potential for big profits to be made quickly from such enterprises.

Based on information from classifieds website Gumtree, a 'stud dog' fee ranges from £100 to £2000, with even higher sums being charged in some cases.

Unlike businesses that breed and sell dogs, those offering stud dogs, canine AI and ultrasound scans do not require a licence to operate. They are not generally regulated unless they offer services that are clearly acts of veterinary surgery.

Is surgical artificial insemination still being offered?

A SMALL number of the many canine fertility clinics in existence in the UK have been found advertising surgical artificial insemination (AI) of bitches – in spite of this type of assisted reproductive intervention having been banned by the RCVS for a year.

Unlike transvaginal AI or transcervical AI, which entails the use of a catheter to administer semen, surgical AI involves general anaesthesia and making an abdominal incision to insert semen directly into the uterus.

The procedure is banned under the Animal Welfare Act, meaning undertaking it constitutes a breach of the law. Experts say it is also highly unethical and painful for bitches due to the subsequent pregnancy putting pressure on abdominal wounds.

Offering the service is not technically illegal, and there is no suggestion that either of the two clinics

identified by *Vet Record* as advertising the procedure have in fact performed it since it was banned last year.

One clinic, North West K9 Breeding Solutions, was found to be advertising the procedure for an undisclosed price as of November last year – months after the ban was announced.

When *Vet Record* telephoned North West K9 Breeding Solutions, a man who answered the phone acknowledged that the procedure was banned and said the relevant text on the clinic's website would be removed. The website appears to have since been taken down.

Another clinic, Berkshire Canine Fertility, has also been advertising canine surgical AI. As of this week, its website continued to state that the procedure could be 'arranged with our highly recommended canine reproductive vet'. The price for the service was not advertised.

Vet Record contacted Berkshire Canine Fertility to ask why it was advertising a banned procedure.

A man who confirmed he was in charge of the business said: 'There's nowhere in the UK that is legally allowed to do surgical insemination. It was made a law because it's seen as unethical and no vets in the UK will actually offer it anymore.'

'The website was made about three years ago when it was an option. As soon as I get a chance I will take it off the website, but it's not something that we can do or that anyone else in the UK can do anymore.'

He added: 'Thank you for making me aware of this because it's something that needs to come off the website. It's not something that we offer and we have not actually ever been able to perform it anyway, so I do appreciate your call.' ●



As soon as I get a chance I will take it off the website

