BBC Trust Committee botches investigation into Watchdog's report on Pets at Home

Saturday 25 March, 2017

In its final task as the BBC's main 'complaints unit', the BBC Trust Committee has criticised the highly respected consumer programme *Watchdog* for some aspects of its investigations into the nationwide pet dealership *Pets at Home,* but the Committee is now in the spotlight itself for running a shoddy investigation. The doomed BBC Trust Committee is being abolished next month after its operation was discredited by MPs and even by its own chairwoman.

The Animal Protection Agency (APA) has called into question the impartiality of the experts used by the BBC Trust Committee.

Following hundreds of complaints from the public about the conditions for animals at Pets at Home, *Watchdog* investigations in 2012 and 2015 reported welfare concerns for both reptiles and fish. The 2015 programme showed undercover footage taken at eight Pets at Home stores and found:

- dead, dying and diseased fish in all eight stores
- promised health checks at point of sale were not being undertaken
- a lizard being kept in a tank that was too small for it
- customers given incorrect advice regarding temperatures for lizards (which could ultimately have resulted in the death of the animals)

Lawyers representing Pets At Home contended that claims made by the programme regarding the health and welfare of some animals in Pets at Homes stores were inaccurate and unfair.

In their adjudication, the BBC Trust Committee backed the *Watchdog* investigation on several findings, including: *"The Committee was also persuaded by the expert evidence that it should be possible to detect sickness or disease in a high proportion of fish before they die, such that they can be removed; the 53 dead fish discovered by the programme suggested that, however frequent the checks by Pets at Home staff, they were not fully effective."*

But the Committee upheld several complaints against *Watchdog*, including whether the programme-makers had correctly referred to a disease as 'white-spot' in some fish that may have been another problem. The Committee's outside consultant challenged *Watchdog's* finding and stated that: *"The white spot on the fish is lymphocystitis, which is caused by a virus and is not highly contagious. It shows up under stress when fish are not well."* The fact that the disease may have been stress-related seems to APA to be the main issue, and not whether the pet store felt unhappy with the diagnosis!

Watchdog's own forensic veterinary expert visited the stores in person as well as viewing footage and photos, and assisted *Watchdog* both during filming and afterwards. However, the BBC Trust Committee relied on the opinion of an outside veterinary consultant who viewed images and film of the fish, but did not see them first hand. The Committee even admitted that it could not be sure that *Watchdog's* and the Committee's vets were analysing the same fish. Yet the Committee in attempting to reinforce their brazen conclusion about 'white spot' resorted to the opinion of a non-expert who was part of their own team.

Worse still, the BBC Trust Committee's 'independent' reptile vet, who gave Pets At Home a relatively clean bill of health demonstrated his lack of knowledge about reptile biology by completely wrongly claiming that 'reptiles do not play' and that bearded dragons are 'very simple animals' – statements that call into question the vet's level of expertise.

Ironically, whilst the Committee also criticised *Watchdog* for a possible lack of impartiality based on the fact that they commissioned an expert who advises animal welfare charities including APA, among many organisations, the Committee itself relied on advice from vets known for their links to the exotic pet industry – including one who is a Director on the board of a pet industry association and another a regular promoter and even sponsor of exotic pet keeping events!

The Animal Protection Agency today called on the BBC Trust to provide an explanation for why the

Media:



Related Sectors:

Environment & Nature :: Farming & Animals :: Leisure & Hobbies ::

Related Keywords:

Exotic Pet :: Pets At Home :: BBC Trust :: Watchdog ::

Scan Me:

Committee thought it pertinent to question the impartiality of *Watchdog's* forensic expert, yet themselves rely heavily on two vets with undeniable vested interests in the sale and keeping of exotic pets.

Kath MacLeod of the BBC Trust Committee replied: "*I am afraid it's not something we would provide a comment on for inclusion in your release."*

Says APA Director, Elaine Toland BSc(Hons) MRSB FRSPH

"It is very concerning that such a Committee can publish falsehoods based on so-called 'experts' who the Committee either already knew were biased or they were too incompetent to find out! The issue is not whether Pets at Home is unhappy with the Watchdog 'diagnosis' but whether animals in their stores are stressed and suffering. The important thing is the welfare of the animals, which this report has done nothing to improve."

Media Contact:

Elaine Toland

01273-674253

07986-535024 (out of hours)

ISDN line for broadcast-quality interviews

Animal Protection Agency

15-17 Middle Street, Brighton, BN1 1AL

Email: info@apa.org.uk

Website: http://www.apa.org.uk

SOURCE Animal Protection Agency (APA)

Company Contact:

Animal Protection Agency Foundation

T. 01273 674253
E. info@apa.org.uk
W. https://www.apa.org.uk

Additional Contact(s):
kat@apa.org.uk
elaine@apa.org.uk

View Online

Additional Assets:

Newsroom: Visit our Newsroom for all the latest stories:
https://www.apaf.pressat.co.uk