

The Biggest Problem

This article was originally published in Double Helix Network News Vol. XIII No.3, Summer 2000.

It was a finalist in DWAA's 2000 Writers' Contest.

by C.A. Sharp

We have met the enemy and he is us.

--Pogo

Within a year and a half of obtaining my first Aussie for show and breeding, I slammed up against the reality of canine genetic disease. I remember standing in the vet's office staring at the first set of hip x-rays I'd ever seen as he explained that Patte was dysplastic. He pointed out features that demonstrated the problem, then asked if I still wanted it sent to OFA. Patte had pre-limed "Good" at a year. I sent them in hoping the vet was wrong. He wasn't.

I got Patte when her first owners gave her back to the breeder because the father lost his job. The breeder thought the 8-month-old had potential and, knowing I wanted an Aussie I could show, placed her with me on condition that she got a litter before I got the papers.

She found a stud and had the preliminary OFA x-ray done. I helped with transport to the distant stud and took care of Patte and the litter, so the breeder let me keep one of the pups, expanding my kennel-to-be to two breeding-quality bitches. In anticipation of having a litter all my own, I'd booked Patte to a well-respected stud. Then OFA's hammer fell.

I called the breeder, who was also my mentor. She was very sorry Patte had failed OFA and agreed that breeding her again was out of the question. When I expressed my distress at having to call the stud owner to say why I couldn't bring Patte to her male, the breeder's tone changed.

"You can't tell anybody about this. It will ruin your reputation and nobody will have anything to do with you.. It will also ruin mine." She went on to tell me that it could ruin Patte's litter, the sire of that litter and even the dog to which I had booked her. She made it very clear that no one should ever know what was wrong with Patte. I knew so little and I thought she knew so much. I trusted her guidance, but her advice left me numb.

I called the stud owner and made a lame excuse to cancel the breeding. I don't remember what I said, but I know it was a lie. I could tell the stud owner knew I wasn't being straight with her. I felt dirty.

This happened to me many years ago, but genetic disease continues to inspire a range of negative human behavior, wrapping the subject in a shroud of secrecy and denial.

Today, I am a breed health advocate and lay genetic counselor. I frequently find myself in the middle of situations like the above. Intimidation to enforce silence, the fear of speaking out, and inability to face facts, not to mention outright lies, are in my opinion the biggest problem breeders face in the attempt to control genetic disease in purebred dogs.

There are many conditions for which science still has too few answers. The expense of testing can be prohibitive. Some diseases occur so late in a dog's career, it will already have puppies and maybe grand-puppies on the ground. All of these pale beside our too-frequent refusal to be honest with ourselves and each other.

Those of us who consider ourselves to be truly dedicated to the preservation of purebred dogs must make a dispassionate analysis of the human behavior surrounding canine genetic disease and realize what it is doing, not only to our dogs, but to ourselves.

The Incurables

You all know them. The ones who put winning above all other goals. "It doesn't matter as long as the dog wins," is their mantra. Their dogs must win, as must their dogs' offspring, and woe betide anyone who stands in their way as they pursue greater breed—and personal—glory.

The full range of the Incurrigibles' ego-driven behavior is beyond the scope and purpose of this article, but it clearly affects genetic disease control. If a genetic problem isn't apparent, they will ignore it. If it can be fixed, they will. If it can't, they will employ some variant on "shoot, shovel and shut-up," or recoup their losses by shipping the dog a long ways away, preferably across an ocean or two. If someone else knows about the problem, the Incurrigible will use any means at his disposal to shut that person up, ranging from veiled threats and rumor-mongering to blatant bully-tactics and threatened legal action. Nothing can be done to change these people. They are who they are and it is unlikely that any act of man or God will alter their course. However, the rest of us can alter our behavior toward them.

The most effective manner of dealing with a bully is to refuse to be bullied. It is hard to keep this in mind when an Incurrigible is threatening you with death, destruction and lawyers. This is especially so if the Incurrigible has a Big Name and you are Nobody (of which status the Incurrigible will frequently remind you.) She will rally her hangers-on to harass and snub you. It hurts to be treated like this, but take a deep breath, give your dog a hug and remember that people who act this way were never your friends in the first place. If La Incurrigible is upset, that is her problem not yours.

In very few cases can an Incurrigible really do anything to you other than attempt to make you miserable, though if you've made the mistake of getting into contractual agreements with such a person you might do well to get a little legal advice on what you can and cannot do in the situation. An ounce of lawyer ahead of time is worth 175 pounds of lawyer in court. You may find that the Incurrigible's legal threats are groundless.

One thing that has always amazed me about Incurrigibles is how many people will speak among themselves about how unprincipled and ruthless they are and yet these same people will do business with them without the blink of an eye. If a person has a reputation as a jerk or dubious honesty, why deal with him? If he has treated others poorly, why would you think it would be different for you?

"Ah, but their dogs win!"

If this is your rejoinder, may I humbly suggest you re-evaluate your priorities. Do so with the picture firmly in mind of a child who has just been told his beloved dog has to be euthanized because it has a devastating hereditary disease.

The Ostrich Syndrome

We have trained ourselves to fear genetic disease in our dogs. Rather than approaching it as just another obstacle a breeder must overcome on the path to producing quality dogs, we react as if we have come caught a socially unacceptable disease. "Love me, love my dog" mutates to "my dog's disease, my disease."

The normal first reaction of anyone confronted with a bad situation is denial: "This can't be happening to me!" But this phase should soon give way to emotions better suited to deal with the problem at hand. Unfortunately, some people get stuck at the denial stage. I have long referred to this as "the Ostrich Syndrome."

The Ostrich will find numerous excuses and justifications for not performing screening tests. He will promise faithfully to get screening done, then fail to do so. He will make no effort to follow-up on indications that something may have occurred in a dog he produced. But ignorance is not bliss for those who have dogs from an Ostrich with a hereditary disease in his line.

An example of the Ostrich Syndrome gone malignant can be found in my own breed, the Australian Shepherd. Epilepsy is a growing problem. It is a difficult disease to diagnose and many things other than epilepsy can cause seizures. Unfortunately, this gives a dedicated Ostrich plenty of maneuvering room. There are many Ostriches who have or have produced epileptic Aussies, but the testing doesn't get done, they won't cooperate with an on-going research project, and what "really" happened is the dog hit it's head/got into ant poison/had heat stroke and so on. Apparently these dogs hit their heads, eat poison or overheat every three to four weeks.

A person stuck in denial can be difficult to dislodge. If someone you know is exhibiting Ostrich tendencies, try to reason with them. Avoid public discussion of the Ostrich's weak spot and don't be confrontational or accusing in your approach, as this will probably encourage the Ostrich to shove her head farther into the sand.

Always be alert for Ostrich tendencies in yourself. If a health situation comes up in one of your dogs, do your best to put your emotional reaction aside, think about the facts and consult with vets and others who may give you factual insight to the situation. If you find yourself saying, "I can't deal with this" or "it can't be true," you may be on the way to Ostrich status.

Circling the Wagons and Feeding Frenzies

Fear of genetic disease can spur group behavior. If someone does something to point out a possible genetic problem in a line or family of dogs, owners and breeders of those dogs may "circle the wagons" to fend off the perceived attack. A united front can be a very effective defense.

Sometimes the defenders will be camp-followers of a big name with whom they wish to curry favor, but more often than not they are people who are threatened by unsolicited and unpleasant news. The latter is an example of group Ostrich Syndrome, a firing squad for the messenger being more comfortable than facing facts. The more pernicious examples of "circle the wagons" behavior include things like the suppression of health survey results and the stifling or outright cancellation of informative articles in club publications.

Every so often, some brave soul will make a very public statement about hereditary disease in specific dogs. Often this is done by placing an ad listing the names and perhaps pedigrees of affected dogs or posting them on a breed discussion list or website. Angry private and public attack often ensues, building to a feeding frenzy in the letter columns and chat lists.

I've watched the scenario unfold several times in my own breed and heard of it happening in others. Negative reaction from some who own relatives of the affected dog is not surprising, but even those with no personal stake in the matter sometimes feel it necessary join the attack. The public confessor will be accused of lying or being misinformed, even if he has thorough veterinary documentation of the disease. Sometimes the protest boggles the mind, as in a letter to a breed magazine excoriating the confessor because she had placed a proven disease carrier in a pet home!

The feeding frenzy is that which most discourages otherwise honest people from speaking out. Standing up under the brunt of public and rancorous attack is difficult. Not everyone has the emotional or moral strength to do so. The confessor can feel isolated and very, very vulnerable. However, a reverse on the "circle the wagons" technique may help.

In most cases, if your dog develops a hereditary disease you will not be the only person it has happened to. A number of years ago Collie Eye Anomaly was a hot-button topic among Australian Shepherd people. A group of breeders with affected dogs went public together, taking out an ad in the Aussie Times listing their names and the names of their affected dogs. They did a follow-up a few months later after they had instituted a test-mating program to clear unaffected relatives. Public comment was positive, though the silence from some quarters was deafening to those in the know. By uniting publicly, they avoided the feeding frenzy that had greeted earlier CEA confessors.

Honest Sam's Used Dogs

There was a time when sexually transmitted diseases were not to be discussed in polite society. Sometimes it seems canine genetic disease is still there. People will go on at great length about the minutiae of coat color, roundly condemn purely aesthetic "faults," and at the same time refuse to discuss other genetic situations which have a clear impact on a dog's health and soundness.

More than one person seeking my input has bemoaned his inability to get any useful information about hereditary disease issues out of people from whom he wants to buy a dog or whose stud he is

considering. Since there is no such thing as a 100% genetically “clean” line, these potential customers are justified in their frustration.

Think about the process of buying a car. You like the way it looks and have read extensively on its performance triumphs. You may even have taken it for a spin and been impressed with the way it handles. But when you ask the salesman about its background, he knows nothing and swears it’s never needed so much as the tires rotated or the oil changed. You decide to do a little independent research before you commit, but consumer reports on the car don’t exist. You can’t find any on other models by that manufacturer. In fact, you can’t find anything but glowing promotional accounts of the manufacturer’s past history, usually generated by an in-house marketing staff.

Dealing in dogs can leave you with much the same experience. It is very difficult for the newcomer who has no connections or frame-of-reference, but even the experienced can find themselves floundering in a sea of non-information. While the actions of others in this regard are beyond your control, how do you behave when you are the “car salesman?”

Within a couple years of my experience with Patte’s hip dysplasia, I decided I wasn’t going to lie. When discussing my dogs with others, both in the process of doing business and casual conversation, I was up front about Patte’s problem. And I certainly appreciated the breeders who were open with me about the weaknesses along with the strengths of their dogs.

We all need to muster the strength of character to bring genetic disease out of the closet. Be willing to say, “When I did this cross, I got that problem in two of six puppies.” No breeder can make good choices when the facts are hidden. If problems occur, the fault lies with the person who neglected to inform the breeder of the potential.

There would be far less problem with inherited diseases if everyone would approach them with the same attitude we take with faults in conformation or performance. These issues are openly discussed at great length. Informed breeders will know that if they cross to dogs from that kennel they may lose some intensity in the trial arena or bring out the straight stifles that lurk in their own dogs’ background. This can be weighed against the positive attributes that kennel can bring them. Genetic disease should be a similarly open book.

The Face in the Mirror

Ultimately, the responsibility for controlling genetic disease belongs to each of us, individually. I hated living a lie in regard to Patte’s hip dysplasia. I finally realized that if I wanted to be able to look myself in the eye when I happened upon a mirror, I had to quit lying about it.

Stand yourself squarely in front of that mirror and ask, “Am I in denial? Have I done anything to gang up on those who have been outspoken about genetic problems? Have I done anything to aid and abet an incorrigible? Have I committed “sins of omission” when dealing with my fellow breeders? “

Only you and the face in the mirror know the true answers to these questions. Only you know if the face you see there is friend or foe in the fight against canine genetic disease.