

Dane Affairs - It's A Matter of Priorities & Perspectives

I've been pretty busy for the last several months so I haven't taken the time to write anything related to dogs for a while. Well, I've got the itch again and I'm back with another column related to the health of our dogs. This time, instead of discussing health issues with the dogs themselves, I'm going to speak to logic and reasoning are related to health and health testing.

We are show breeders and we want to produce the finest dogs possible. The best way to do that is to have as much knowledge about our dogs as we can. Knowledge is power. It is the foundation of our breed. Ideally, we all will want to be generous with our knowledge. This sets the example so the future generations of breeders that come behind us can build upon this foundation and make it that much stronger.

How do we obtain breadth and depth of knowledge about our dogs? One aspect of this is addressed the scope of our health testing. There is money involved and in these economic times, nobody is being frivolous with cash. But we may want to take an objective look at our priorities.

One of the things that I hear most often when discussing the data I have collected on my dogs is, "I can't afford to do that much testing." Can you afford to do that much showing and advertising? Which is more important in the long run?

It is my opinion that if you are actively breeding dogs, you can't afford NOT to do that much testing! How else will you ever know what you have in your bloodline? It's a matter of priority.

I was talking about the mitral valve dysplasia incidence in some of the dogs I bred with someone who had dogs related to mine. They

told me that none of their related dogs had MVD. I asked them if they did echoes on the dogs they were referring to and they said they had not. Then how did they know? There is no way they could know these dogs did not have mitral valve dysplasia without echoing each and every one of them.

It is really easy to say we don't have this problem or that problem if we have never done a valid check for it. The fact is, they had no idea if those dogs had mitral valve dysplasia or not.

Relatively speaking, it doesn't really take that much money to baseline an entire litter if you really want to know what is going on. OFA will accept cardiac results at 1 year of age. If we make this a priority, then the time and money will be available. Yes, it is a chunk of change to do this. On the other hand, on average the price of one puppy will cover the cost of getting baseline echoes on a good sized litter. It is a matter of perspective.

There are clinics held at shows that are very affordable and many cardiologists are willing to provide discounted pricing for family groups. It has been my experience that veterinary specialists engaged in testing dogs readily support those breeders that are trying to get a breadth of knowledge about their bloodline.

Over the course of having many echocardiograms done by several different cardiologists, I have found quite a variance in the consistency with how cardiologists perceive the results they obtain from the measurements and visual cues obtained during the echo.

Based on this variance and the way different cardiologists approach working with breeders, it is not unusual to have a difference of opinion between cardiologists looking at the exact same

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dog. Some cardiologists are far more conservative in their evaluations than others and they have different opinions about various conditions dogs have. In one of my dogs with very mild MVD, I'm convinced I could take her to a different cardiologist and get an OFA clearance on her.

I don't believe that cardiologists are trying to appeal to breeders by misinforming them about the condition of their dogs or that they are intentionally misleading breeders. I believe that interpretation of the echocardiogram results is subjective. In fact, it is not unlike judging dogs.

Seriously, interpretation of echo results is an art and a science. It is easy enough to see the numbers from the measurements and arrive at some conclusion. But the nature of living organisms doesn't lend itself to static determinations based on numbers alone. Seeing the actual motion of the heart in how it contracts and how those valves function is more than just capturing measurements.

This is one reason why baselines are so important. What is normal for one dog, may be an indicator of disease for another. Having a history of echo results over the life of a dog can be essential in accurate interpretation of results over time. And, if you are checking the whole litter, there is an exponential accumulation of data you have to work with; to make your breeding decisions with.

Having quantifiable information about the health of our dogs and making it available will go a long way to dispel misinformation. There is hesitation over what people might say about our dogs or how the 'facts' may be morphed over the course of being passed along. What better way to set the story straight than to

make the documented evidence, good or bad, publically available?

What harm does it really do to let people know that a dog is/was affected with a serious disease? There is no shame in producing a dog that has a health issue, no matter what that health issue is. These are living, breathing, beings with very complex physiological processes. How can we ever expect, or be expected, to perfect that?

I can't think of a single human being that I know that doesn't have some physical issue. Maybe they have allergies or sensitivities to various things. They might have some medical condition that necessitates daily prescription drugs. They may have some kind of inherited medical condition. I have all of these! Thank doG *I* did not reproduce! :) Why does anyone expect that our dogs will not have health issues or that anyone who breeds a dog with health issues is reckless (or worse!)?

I have posted on my website a statement to the effect that we just don't know enough about genetic disease or heritability factors to hold a bias against any breeder, pedigree, dog or bitch. The fact is, there is never going to be a living organism that doesn't have some kind of health issue.

Realistically, we can never breed dogs that will not have health issues. But we can be conscientious about gathering health information on our dogs and sharing it for the benefit of all concerned. If we can let go of the negative perceptions associated with health issues in general, dogs that have them and breeders that acknowledge them, that will be a huge step in the right direction.