

Pedigree Dogs: Welfare Concerns and the Way Forward

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Introduction

Issues relating to the health and welfare of pedigree dogs have been expressed for nearly 50 years (Hodgeman, 1963). Companion dogs were once selected for their ability to perform in a working environment. However, the dogs of today are selected for aesthetic qualities set out in written breed standards (Rooney & Sargan, 2010). Many individuals within these select breed lines suffer compromised welfare either directly or indirectly due to selective breeding and reduced genetic variability (Rooney & Sargan, 2010). In order to progress towards individuals with a healthier future and improve the welfare of pedigree dogs, scientific evidence linking breed standards to clinically observed disorders needs to be gathered to give definitive proof that certain standards should be changed, and some breeding practices abolished (Nicholas *et al.*, 2010).

Discussion

Breed standards are a set of written ideals open to individual interpretation, formulated through input from the Kennel Club and breeder clubs (Rooney & Sargan, 2010). Breeders also work from within a closed studbook, which prevents entry of new genes into the population (Rooney & Sargan, 2010). Many breeds have originated from only a few individuals, with inbreeding and “line breeding” being used to fix traits within the breed (Summers *et al.*, 2010). There is also a tendency to breed from only those individuals displaying the best example of the breed traits, further limiting the genetic variability of offspring produced (Rooney & Sargan, 2010). This has resulted in several breeds having a very limited gene pool, predisposing these dogs to genetic disorders (Rooney & Sargan, 2010). These health issues are categorised as either directly related to the conformation being sought through the breed standards, or indirectly as genetic disorders arising more frequently due to the limited genetics of the populations (Rooney & Sargan, 2010).

There is evidence that a large number of disorders are present within pedigree dog breeds. Of the 50 most popular breeds in the United Kingdom, all have been demonstrated, by the review of literature, to have a physical conformation that predisposes them to a disorder (Asher *et al.*, 2009). Further, within these same breeds there are almost 400 inherited disorders that are not linked to the breed standards but rather have appeared due to the limited nature of the pedigree dog genomes (Summers *et al.*, 2010). The Generic Illness Severity Index for Dogs (GISID) allows for the severity of disorders to be considered for their impact on health and wellness of an individual animal, allowing a comparison of the severity of different disorders to be made (Asher *et al.*, 2009). By increasing the quality and quantity of information available to be analysed via GISID, priorities can be determined for which genetic disorders need to be targeted for removal from populations.

There also exist problems with selecting dogs for breeding: while some breeders are dedicated to improving the breed to the best of their knowledge, there are also commercial breeders who breed only for profit, without care for the welfare of their stock (Crispin, 2011).

In order to improve on the health and welfare of pedigree dogs, a collaborative effort in the UK between the newly formed Advisory Council on the Welfare Issues of Dog Breeding, breeders, veterinarians and others involved, such as the Kennel Club, needs to be undertaken with better welfare for pedigree dogs as the main aim. The first report of the newly formed Council, headed by Sheila Crispin (2011), has several recommendations for improving dog welfare.

The role of veterinarians in improving pedigree dog welfare is crucial. Through the implementation and use of a recording database on inherited disorders, veterinarians can

assist in notifying breeder societies and animal welfare groups of the problems observed in an unbiased way (Crispin, 2011). Once this scientific evidence has been assembled true correlations between breed standards and health problems can be made (Summers *et al.*, 2010) and direct action can begin. Further, this process must remain active in the long term, in order to prevent these problems from recurring within breeds or new inherited disorders being introduced into a breed (Crispin, 2011).

In order also to improve the genetic variability within breeds, registering bodies such as the Kennel Club need to take an active role in changing the conditions surrounding the registration of animals (Crispin, 2011). By no longer allowing closely related animals to be bred, and opening the studbooks to allow new animals to be bred from, there would be a greater genetic potential within breed populations (Rooney & Sargan, 2010). As the reduced genetics of a breed predispose it to genetic diseases, increasing the genetic variability is a means of decreasing the prevalence of a disease within the population, improving the health and welfare of future animals involved.

Another key step towards healthier pedigree dogs is to persuade judges and breeders to prioritise the health of animals over adherence to breed standards (Rooney & Sargan, 2010). Although only a small percentage of pedigree dogs are shown, there is a strong tendency for successful show dogs to be used widely at stud, which greatly limits the genetics of the breed (Summers *et al.*, 2010). Ensuring that the public is aware of issues is also important, as this will increase the selection pressure for healthier puppies from both registered and commercial breeders, resulting in dogs that are less prone to genetic disorders and have an improved quality of life (Crispin, 2011).

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is no simple, single-step solution to the problems faced by pedigree dogs, and it is only through a combination of efforts by many parties that the evidence can be gathered and changes enforced to address their suffering. While physical attributes remain the focus of breeding standards, the health and welfare of dogs will remain open to abuse. The first steps of forming an independent Council and genetic disease database have begun. However, perseverance will be needed to ensure that all problems are adequately addressed.

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