

Anatomy of a Breed Health Initiative

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A breed health initiative is often a demanding process. However, once accomplished it offers the reward of improved health and vitality for the breed. Many dog breeds have not carried out a breed health initiative, and may not know the steps to take, or the planning that is involved. The following may serve as an anatomical template:

BRAINS: What are the breed's health issues?

There will always be "hot button" health issues that breeders will list as most important for the breed. These will not necessarily be the most frequent health issues, or issues that are significantly affecting breed health. They may just be health issues that breeders and owners are talking about at the time. Regardless of this fact, if a health issue is generating dialogue within a breed, it presents an opportunity for action and progress.

The best means to establish a priority list for breed health initiatives is through a statistically valid breed health survey. Just like a census, a breed health survey should be conducted every 5-10 years, to document the number and frequency of conditions that are occurring. Several university-based veterinary epidemiologists conduct breed health surveys for parent clubs. Such scientific surveys can eliminate sampling errors and bias that can invalidate survey results.

Once a breed health issue is identified and established as important for the breed, the hard work and hard questions start: Is this health issue an inherited condition? Does it occur with increased frequency in your breed versus other breeds? Has an inherited basis and a mode of inheritance been established in your breed, in other breeds, or in other species?

To answer these questions, the breed would be best served by contacting a professional researcher with an interest in the condition. The AKC Canine Health Foundation may know of such researchers. Often times, a parent club member (in many instances a breeder or owner of an affected animal) will contact several veterinary colleges and scientists looking for someone with an established interest into the problem.

HEART: We love our breed, but are we willing to tackle our health problems?

A breed health initiative is an emotional issue that involves owners and breeders of affected dogs, club leaders and members. It is only through the love of the breed that all can join together and successfully address health issues for the overall benefit of the breed.

Once a list of reported disorders in a breed is established through a breed health survey, the parent club can determine where to prioritize research and funding efforts. Health issues with the highest priority may not be the most frequently occurring. Disorders that cause death or incurable debilitating illness may have a higher priority than those that are easily treatable or do not affect the general health of the animal. The late Dr. George Padgett of Michigan State University ranked health issues based on a "hierarchy of disagreeability."

Addressing a health issue requires research and therefore, funding. While the AKC Canine Health Foundation regularly funds research, the breed club will need to support a breed-specific research effort. Many clubs have carried out novel fund-raising methods for health research. These can include proceeds from show entries and advertising, the purchase of health pins (dog "angels"), raffles, and silent auctions.

The parent breed club should foster an environment of openness and health consciousness by promoting and utilizing open health registries. The parent breed club should enroll in CHIC: the canine health information center (www.caninehealthinfo.com).

GUTS: A health initiative requires fortitude and perseverance.

There can be resistance within the breed to a health initiative. For some, it will be fear of negative publicity for the breed by openly addressing a breed-related disorder. For others, it will be a self-serving effort due to fear of uncovering health issues in their own animals.

Resistance to a breed health effort can have a polarizing effect on a breed and its parent club. Lawsuits may be threatened, though in my experience, no such lawsuits have ever benefited a breed, or in the long run any breeders that initiate them. Some club members may declare that if everything is not known about the disorder, then information about it should not be discussed or disseminated. However, discussion of breed health issues can not be limited to executive sessions. It is only through open discussion and dissemination of information that a breed health initiative can be successful.

Despite the rapid progress and success of the genome projects, the identification of defective genes, and establishment of genetic testing programs could still take several years. The breed club must continue to educate its members, pass on valid recommendations for breeding management, and maintain a positive environment for breeders and owners dealing with the health issue. No one wants to breed carriers or produce affected offspring. Each breeder will find themselves in a different situation concerning each identified health issue. If lucky with one health issue, breeders must recognize that they may be the one dealing with carrier breeding stock and affected offspring with the next health issue.

LEG WORK: Identification and commitment to a health issue is only the beginning.

Once a health issue has been identified, the data must be collected to allow the possibility for valid research. This requires the trust of breeders and owners. In most instances, a professional researcher can ensure confidentiality and work to confirm diagnoses and collect data.

For involved families, breeders will have to contact the owners of offspring for blood or cheek swab collection. Breeders may feel uncomfortable making these contacts, especially to pet owners. However, experience shows that owners are interested and willing to cooperate with health research, and are usually impressed with the breeder's interest. For cases where the breeder is uncomfortable making the contacts, the researcher can often do so on their behalf.

Often times, research grants do not fund the collection DNA samples, so the collection and shipment to the researcher will be born by the owners. In most instances, this is not a problem. With researcher generated literature on the research and collection of samples, the primary veterinarian will often keep the cost for sample collection to a minimum. On an individual basis, the parent club may want to subsidize the overnight shipment of blood samples in hardship cases.

???: The end result.

If a breed health initiative is successful, a genetic test can be developed to assist breeders. A genetic test is a powerful tool, and can have either positive or devastatingly negative results on a breed. Breeders must recognize that a test for carriers only identifies one of the 30,000 to 40,000 genes in their dog.

With such a test, carriers can be bred to normal-testing individuals, and replaced in a breeding program with normal-testing offspring. With a genetic test, no affected individuals ever need to be produced. If an individual who was determined to be of breeding quality tests as a carrier, the worst thing you can do is remove that individual from breeding.

It is only through the breed's quality individuals that the breed can improve, become more diverse, and healthier. Removing all carriers from breeding will restrict the gene pool, reduce genetic diversity, and possibly promote future genetic disease through genetic bottlenecking.

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