Shattering The Myths

Nearly two years have come and gone since Gabrielle died of renal dysplasia (RD). The pause in my series of articles, due to the sudden death of my mother, has given me a chance to reflect. In this next series, I'd like to share new information that has shattered some of my beliefs about RD. My articles are intended to take you along the process of a breeder facing a devastating genetic problem. In that spirit, I continue.

Prior to Gabrielle's death I believed I was an informed, responsible breeder. I believed that I produced Lhasas that represented the standard. I believed I produced Lhasas free of genetic defects. After all, my dogs looked healthy and lived to be old dogs. When Gabrielle died, that myth was shattered. I was shattered!

In 1997 my entire kennel of Lhasas and most of the Lhasas I co-own with Julie Timbers had been biopsied. I had formulated a plan for going forward with excitement and confidence -- a plan that would allow me to preserve what I had worked to achieve for nearly 20 years. Critical to the formula was a handsome young dog named Vinnie. He represented everything I have attempted to preserve in our breed. He was a typey dog, representing five generations of my lineage. And he had normal kidneys. He was my new foundation.

In June 1997, Vinnie died. Necropsy and laboratory tests showed he died of acute gastritis. His death shattered my belief that he was the solution to my problems.

Prior to Vinnie's death, my focus had been on salvaging what I had left. I hadn't seriously considered introducing other bloodlines. That may sound like an oversight, but my mind was so caught up in the abnormality, the disease, of RD. How to fix it. How to deal with it. I was also afraid to go outside my line. At least I knew what skeletons were in my closet. Maybe not the skeletons you or I would choose, but I knew what they were. Hearing rumors of other health problems, including PRA and hip dysplasia, made me leery of introducing unknown genes. I certainly didn't want to add fuel to the fire!

Now, my plan was shattered. I had to consider other options. I was apprehensive that once I went public, nobody would want to be involved with me. How could I ask another breeder to have a surgical procedure performed on their Lhasa just because I would like to utilize their gene pool in my breeding program? Who would allow their dogs to be introduced into my lineage? Who would want to be associated with me and my RD problems?

Prior to making my RD problem public knowledge, I had contacted a fellow breeder whom I've always admired and respected. We see eye to eye, head to head on the breed. I asked for his understanding and his support. I wanted to know if he would allow me to use his stud dogs. He gave all I asked for and more. He also opened up an additional avenue of concerned breeders.

This fellowship of interested breeders has helped me beyond measure. There are many breeders who place the health and well-being of the breed above the illusion of "reputation." Not all breeders want to hide or ignore the very real problem this breed has with renal dysplasia.

Several breeders have had biopsies done on their dogs. Other breeders have told me that they would be willing, now or later, to have biopsies performed if they had a dog I might be interested in introducing to my breeding program. Still others have offered outstanding dogs to me. I am grateful. These people have shattered the belief that I'd be ostracized.

I did seriously consider never breeding Lhasas again, but decided it is my obligation to follow this RD odyssey through to whatever end comes. This is happening to me during a time in history when DNA research is exploding. Finding the mutation in the gene responsible for this developmental problem in the kidney will be the answer for responsible breeders who are trying to produce healthy dogs. The research at VetGen -- developing a DNA test for RD in the Lhasa Apso -- was started because of me and my dogs' contributions. The answers, the tools for breeders, are probably just around the corner. The contributions to science that my dogs have made keeps me committed to following through. I consider myself lucky to be facing RD presently, rather than even three years ago. I consider our breed extremely lucky because VetGen has chosen this as one of the current research projects.

There are continuing beliefs that adequate RD research projects have already been done at both the University of Georgia and the University of California at Davis. I have not found any evidence of this. According to the breeder who donated the RD affected puppies to Dr. Finco at the University of Georgia, the project fizzled out. I have not been able to find anything published regarding a "colony" of Lhasa Apsos used in research in the 1960s at the University of California. I have not been able to find any researchers who have any information on this project. Dr. George Lees, in a letter to me, states, "The difficulty of this disease (renal dysplasia) as a research problem is the lack of any good ideas about what the basic cause might be. Without a testable hypothesis, researchers have little chance of making substantial progress, and therefore, they focus their investigations in other areas."

Even if the University of California's project was followed through to a conclusion, current science would most likely render the information obsolete. In the past, veterinarians rather than molecular geneticists did the research projects. The progress being made daily in the very specialized field of DNA research is incredible. Our dogs will benefit from this technology. The answers current science will provide for breeders shatter the belief some breeders have that adequate research has already been done.

The grim predictions of early death have proven invalid. All of my dogs are still alive and apparently healthy. Chiata, 40 percent affected, is alive and well. She concentrates urine. She drinks a normal amount of water. I suspect she will live well into middle age, perhaps even longer. A Shih Tzu, 30 percent affected, was 13 years old when she died of heart failure! I really started questioning the life expectancy predictions when a 4-year-old dog's biopsy came back at 15 percent. According to the life expectancy predictions, she should have been dead two years ago! She seemed healthy, also concentrating urine and drinking normal amounts of water.

It really made no sense to me that the 15 percent dogs would die between 1 and 2 years of age, considering that humans can live normally with only one kidney. Janet Edwards, a Shih Tzu breeder, told me that she has found the life expectancy predictions invalid. Good news for Chiata, but shattering breeders' beliefs that they are breeding healthy Lhasas because the dogs are alive and vigorous at an older age.

In the past two years I have become informed about renal dysplasia. I am learning which of our beliefs are valid and which of our beliefs are myths. I will continue learning and sharing because of my love for this breed. I will continue sharing because of the support and friendship I've received. We are the caretakers of this breed. It is our responsibility to separate the truth from the myths.