

The Ostrich Syndrome

In the decade and a half I have spent informing and educating breeders about genetics and hereditary disease in Australian Shepherds, the most common ailment that has come to my attention is also the most serious. Ironically, it is not hereditary. Dogs never get it. You won't find it in any text or resource manual. But it's out there, and its presence can make controlling hereditary disorders difficult to impossible. I call it the "Ostrich Syndrome."

According to legend, an ostrich will shove its head down in the sand when confronted with something unpleasant. I have encountered more than a few dog breeders who take a similar stance when faced with even a possibility that their dogs might have or carry hereditary disease. What you don't know won't hurt you, they seem to think. It may not hurt you, but it can hurt your dogs.

The Ostrich Syndrome can damage dogs in a number of ways. The ignorance, denial and fear it fosters in breeders can prevent genetic diseases from being identified and studied early enough to keep them from becoming widespread. Breeds which develop a reputation for being disease-ridden risk rejection by the public -- including that part of it engaged in agriculture. No farmer or rancher wants a sickly or crippled working animal.

The Ostrich Syndrome has its effect on individual dogs too. In some cases dogs which are ill will not get the care they need or will be euthanized and forgotten as quickly as possible. Even healthy dogs can die from the Ostrich Syndrome. More than one high-quality animal has died an unexpected and tragic death -- always of something distinctly non-hereditary -- when too many of its descendants have been diagnosed with genetic disease.

A few Ostrich Syndrome afflicted breeders avoid testing their dogs for one problem or another because "it's never happened in this line." Well, there's a first time for everything and if no one is checking there may be a lot of it before you realize what has happened.

Others will excuse an animal which suffers from something very like a hereditary problem with any number of flimsy excuses, most of which boil down to "it's a fluke so I can ignore it." But a rose by any other name can have nasty thorns. Convincing yourself they were caused by too much or too little ozone will not make their prick less painful.

An interesting and dangerous symptom exhibited by some Ostrich Syndrome sufferers is the tendency to shun those free of the disorder. I once heard of a case where one breeder refused to sell a dog to another because the second breeder tested for a particular disease. In other cases breeders who have stepped forward and said "this dog of mine has/carries such-and-such disease" have been vilified by their peers. I cannot fathom why someone would heap scorn upon the breeder who makes an honest admission that he has had a problem.

This latter reaction is a form of shooting the messenger. Should some poor soul discover that his dog has a problem and try to share this information with its Ostrich Syndrome infected breeder, he may find that the breeders holds him responsible. Responses can range from unreturned phone calls to abusive language and even threats. As a person who is something of a full-time messenger, I've experienced this more than once.

Humans have an unfortunate compulsion for assigning blame. If something is wrong, somebody (other than me) must be at fault and that somebody should pay. When the Ostrich Syndrome breeder shoves his head deep in the sand and still finds a problem glaring him in the face, he is apt to explode in a flurry of pointing fingers.

Breeders with Ostrich Syndrome are not bad people intent on destroying our breed. They are frightened people faced with something they don't fully understand, something which threatens the considerable emotional and financial investment they have in their dogs. Denial in the face of the unthinkable is a normal reaction. It gives us a little breathing space in which we can marshal our inner resources to face an unpleasant reality. The Ostrich Syndrome is the refusal to step beyond that initial state of denial.

Hereditary disease is no one's fault. The genes which cause it have been there since before there were dogs one could a particular breed of dog. Even in the very rare case of a genetic mutation, the owner and breeder of the animal are not responsible for its occurrence. Accepting this fact would go a long way toward "curing" the Ostrich Syndrome.

Such a cure would free breeders to discuss hereditary problems openly and rationally, leading ultimately to better control of genetic disease.

If we fail to cure the Ostrich Syndrome, we are putting at risk the breed we all claim to love. We must pull our heads out of the sand, stifle our tendency to deny and blame, and face facts. Genetic diseases occur in Australian Shepherds, as they do in all other breeds. Overall we are not in bad shape, but we could get there. Every one of you reading this can think of at least one other breed so riddled with a hereditary disease that it has become irredeemably associated with that disease. We don't want this to happen to our breed. Facing facts can be painful, but the alternative is far worse.

An Ostrich sticks his head in the sand, and thinks that he can't be seen because he can't see. Now picture the Ostrich in this humorous, vulnerable, thinks he's safe position, as something big and bad bites him in the ass.

Grimms Fairy Tails?

C A SHARP

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