

The Breath of Life

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Rarely in my thirty-some years of Veterinary practice have I been moved by something that made so much sense! It was the Pekingese breed seminar at Westminster Kennel Club where the discussion about “breathing” and “oxygen deprivation” was bravely initiated by the two speakers. I thought that it would be a welcome subject, but to my amazement, I heard comments like “you mean if the best specimen there has constricted nostrils, and trouble breathing, that we should put them at the back of the class!?” Some judges responded: If they can’t breathe and we are judging breeding stock, I hope we can eventually disqualify them.

These comments were a surprise to me and a shock. It showed the lack of understanding of the importance of narrow nostrils and the associated inability to breath. Allow me to relate a veterinary incident with a recognized Pekingese breeder:

At a show at which I was exhibiting, I was asked if I would examine a dog that was having breathing difficulties. I immediately thought of an allergic response or an inflammatory condition that I would be able to assist with. We made our way through the maze of dog show vehicles to their lovely motor home. As my eyes were adjusting to less light, my gazing surveyed a number of Pekingese, some in crates and some just lounging on furniture - but I was immediately drawn to a young dog with labored excursion of breathing as he tried to display his excitement that his owner had returned. The struggle was getting more intense as he was carried to me - into a better light.

He was a young dog, one of best examples of the breed that I had seen in awhile. His respirations were as though someone had their hand over his nose. He struggles to draw inward, with his mouth open and tail wagging. His tongue was injected (more color than normal, and had that lavender tone- of anoxia). The owners asked if something could be done. With a quick nod of affirmation, I could see that his nostrils were collapsed and his nose was unusually small. His eyes were wild with that desperation of suffocation (like drowning) as he caught my gaze into his eyes.

I was then asked if I could take him with me. My nod was negative. I explained that he could die at any moment and that she would need to be responsible for his transportation to my clinic several hundred miles away. I was anxious for him to get relief as soon as possible. Though plans were made that day, sadly, he did not make it.

Many times since, my mind has drifted to the many other issues surrounding this sad story. How many individuals are in the hands of people that have no idea that these dogs are in trouble and

cannot breathe? Families that decide to take these dogs outside on a sunny day to play ball in the back yard and they end up in the emergency clinic with heat prostration and heat stroke, which can also cause their death and is often because of narrowing nostrils.

Are the breeders even aware? Or do they even realize the importance of this? The person who's story I related, was at the Westminster Dog Show and I was happy to report that I had just come back from the breed seminar in which anoxia, and suffocation because of narrowing nostril is being beginning to be considered in the category of disqualification. The response from this breeder was, "We will just see about that"! I totally did not comprehend such a response when this issue had touched them and their dogs in such a direct way.

This issue is not just in Pekingese. We see and surgically correct nostrils in Shih Tzu, Bulldogs, French Bulldogs, many Pugs, Chow Chows, Shar Pei, Brussels Griffon to name just a few. The surgery consists of deep incisions up each nostril to remove a wedge of tissue which often must extend into the facial area. The closure must be accurate to gain the opening effect or the whole surgery is a failure. The location is very hemorrhagic and healing is irritable for the patient who must wear a cone over his head to prevent them from rubbing out the sutures.. I applaud the Pekingese breeders for being the first to dare look with crises directly in the face - (in the nose). Even though many breed standards have addressed or commented about "open nostrils", there is little or no attention paid. As a judge, I have witnessed colleagues putting up beautiful examples of breeds that can barely breathe.

Again, is this an example of not knowing, or not caring? If it is not caring, you need to put teeth into your breed standard. If it is not knowing or understanding, we have a lot of instructional work to do in the future. It is a greater issue than deafness in some breeds, or and more debilitating than blindness.