

Breeder versus Veterinarian: **And never the twain shall meet?**

Christine M. Scruggs, VMD

Copyright 2005

When asked by *SPM* to write an article on life as a breeder versus a veterinarian, I thought, "What in interesting concept...it can't be too hard to write about such a subject as that is essentially just discussing my life." I have written articles for several magazines, including scientific periodicals while I was in college and working in the pharmaceutical industry, and more recently, genetics and reproduction articles for *Poodle Variety*. So, with such experience, how hard can it be (I thought to myself)? Well, as I am discovering, perhaps not quite so easy. First of all, when I write an article on genetics or other type of subject matter, I outline my general thoughts, determine which areas need the most researching, then begin research through the library, internet, telephone conversations, etc. to obtain the needed information. Then I put everything together on my computer, proofread it over and over, and finally ask my husband to read and critique my efforts. Now, there is no research available, merely the reliability of memory (and you know how that can be...) as well as expressing thoughts and feelings about a variety of subjects. While I am not normally shy about expressing my opinions, some of those written in this article may ruffle the feathers of more than one reader. So, where to begin?

Poodles have always been a part of my life, beginning when I was born and my mother, Erva, had a small kennel known as Tiva Standards. She only had a few litters, in conjunction with Barbara Biercz, aka "Bobby" of Stormy Lane Kennels. I grew up with Standard puppies frolicking around me and was considered "just another puppy" by the adult dogs of the household. Bobby was a veterinary technician when I was a child and I used to visit her while she groomed our dogs. I would tell her how much I wanted to be a veterinarian and breed Standard Poodles. Well, she could be a bit gruff at times, and she would tell me that while breeding and showing dogs was tough work, she didn't think I would really want to be a veterinarian. She told me, it's not all about making dogs better - sometimes you see the dark side of humanity, abused and misused animals, and people who just don't care. Besides, she said, breeders know a lot more about their dogs than a vet ever will. She was never one to mince words.

I lost Bobby when I was seventeen, when she died of cancer. Like many poodle people, she was a tough mentor but a wonderful friend, and I will always miss her. I know she was there at the completion of my first conformation champion, eleven years after her death, and at my graduation from the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine, four years later. I founded Tivin Standard Poodles in 1991, between college and veterinary school. I was a breeder for four years before entering veterinary school, and my perspective on many subjects was quite different from those of my classmates. For instance, genetics and reproduction was very briefly introduced, mostly students were taught to encourage everyone to spay and neuter. Nutrition was a minor focus, and beyond prescription diets and hospital concoctions for seriously ill animals, students were encouraged to retail foods like those from the large dog food companies. These very same companies courted students with free bags of food among other incentives.

And finally, students were taught that breeders can be the best and the worst of their clients. I believe that breeders and veterinarians can work together, and that a good breeder and an excellent veterinarian can make an unbeatable team. As a breeder, I feel that poodles are an exceptional breed, really the best breed that exists. A family in search of the perfect pet has several varieties and colors to choose from, with the added advantage of intelligence, playfulness, longevity and the convenience of no shedding. Poodles are beyond versatile, participating in conformation, agility, tracking, hunting, obedience, assisted living (hearing-ear and seeing-eye dogs, etc.) among a great many activities.

A good breeder wants to improve the breed, containing or decreasing health problems if possible, while maintaining beauty and intelligence at the same time. Just like all purebred dogs, the poodle has several heritable diseases which are seen within the gene pool. At this time, health issues with poodles include Addison's disease, Cushing's disease, cerebellar abiotrophy, cerebellar hypoplasia, degenerative joint disease (often manifesting in hip dysplasia), entropion and ectropion, epilepsy, gastric dilatation and volvulus, hypothyroidism, juvenile renal disease, Legg-Calve-Perthes syndrome, monorchid and cryptorchidism, optic nerve hypoplasia, patellar luxation, patent ductus arteriosus, progressive retinal atrophy, sebaceous adenitis, and von Willebrand's disease. If I have neglected to mention any genetic problems a reader is familiar with in conjunction with poodles, please feel free to contact me through my website at www.tivinpoodles.com. As a breeder I have endeavored to maintain as a healthy a line as possible, and as a veterinarian I have learned a tremendous amount about all of these diseases and more.

While I was in veterinary school, I focused on canine reproduction and genetics as much as possible. It was very obvious to me how these subjects lack in availability to students, and that most veterinarians have very little experience in these areas. In that sense, Bobby was right in saying that breeders knew more about their breed than any veterinarian could begin to know. There are hundreds of dog breeds throughout the world, imagine if veterinarians knew all there was to know about each one of them! It is impossible, of course. It's bad enough that we have to learn about all of the systems and diseases of multiple species; please don't ask us to learn everything about every different breed! There is definitely not enough room in *my* head for all of that! Just like a good breeder, however, a good veterinarian should be willing to research a particularly difficult case, and should consider breed-specific problems when dealing with health issues in animals.

In the United States, as I am sure in other countries, there is a small population of veterinarians who do focus on canine genetics and reproduction. These are the people to whom a breeder should turn when trying to deal with fertility or heritability issues. Nutrition, on the other hand, is something that can create quite a controversy. Veterinarians are taught that dog food is bought in bags from the big name companies who have lots of research to prove that their food is the best. There are companies which actually determine the best ratio of individual components within the food, such as vitamins and minerals, and which stage of life for which the food is best suited to be offered.

As a breeder, I started my dogs on a mixture of an all-natural kibble along with "raw" food such as ground chicken and beef, bone meal, and vegetables. I also give them raw chicken backs and necks, along with beef bones to chew on and keep their teeth clean. I have had great success with healthy, happy dogs that rarely have indigestion, grow good, strong coats and have nice length of bone and deep muscle bellies. Imagine the horror on my professor's face when I mentioned what I have been feeding my dogs for many years and asked what she thought about

it. Of course, all the old arguments were brought to the forefront – bacterial infection, contamination, prion disease (like bovine spongiform encephalopathy, otherwise known as mad cow disease), parasites, pancreatitis, intestinal obstruction, gastritis, enteritis, etc. There were plenty of arguments against feeding the type of diet I preferred to give my dogs as a breeder, but not much by way of research. It should be noted that the dog food industry is a billion dollar industry in the United States, those large companies have plenty of money to lobby the public and veterinary community alike in promoting their food as the “best.”

By the time I was subjected to the dizzying array of “facts” as a veterinary student, I had already had years of experience feeding my dogs what I considered to be an ideal diet. I understand the pros and cons of a raw versus kibble diet. I also understand that my dogs are healthy, happy, beautiful poodles with few health issues. They do not have skin allergies, “hot spots”, pancreatitis, etc. I have never had one of my dogs become sick from salmonella, *E. coli*, yersinia, or campylobacter among other bacterial strains. Not one of my dogs has come down with parasitic infections from eating raw beef or chicken. On the other hand, if a person is going to include raw food in the diet for their dogs, that person must use proper handling and storage to be sure that no one is exposed to bacterial or other infections from the raw meat. It is not that difficult. Most veterinarians, however, will react with horror if you tell them that, as a breeder, you feed and recommend raw beef, chicken, etc.

Another subject of which I clash with veterinary colleagues is my belief in a limited vaccination schedule for dogs and cats. While treating the first standard poodle I purchased on my own for a severe case of immune-mediated thrombocytopenia (ITP), I began to research immune mediated diseases and possible causes. During my years at veterinary school and as a veterinarian I have treated many cases of immune mediated hemolytic anemia (IMHA) as well as a few cases of ITP. There is a correlation between onset of these diseases and some sort of immune stimulation, including vaccinations. The other common cause of inducing ITP and IMHA are tick-borne diseases like ehrlichiosis and Rocky Mountain spotted fever. And I have seen a case of IMHA which resulted post-partum, approximately one month after the bitch gave birth.

Knowing that vaccinations stimulate the immune system I began to wonder how necessary it really is to vaccinate yearly, such as is recommended by the manufacturers of the vaccines for distemper, parvovirus, parainfluenza, adenovirus, coronavirus, leptospirosis, etc. Many vaccines are manufactured and retailed as yearly vaccinations for the lifetime of the dog or cat. This became especially concerning to me when I had children and realized that their vaccines are completed by the age of 4 or 5 years, with an occasional tetanus booster every 10 years. So why is it that humans only need to be vaccinated in childhood, but dogs are vaccinated every year for their entire life? As a matter of fact, I was vaccinated for rabies in 1995 as a veterinary student, and have had titers measured every 3 years since then, with adequate levels each time. Our immune systems are very similar and there are several diseases which can be passed between canines and humans (not many, thankfully). But this being the case, why is it recommended that we vaccinate our dogs every year?

There are two main arguments for yearly vaccinations, both of which I think are poor excuses for the problem. First, the vaccine companies do not have the research proving that vaccines do not need to be boosted yearly (neither do they have the research proving that they *do* need to be vaccinated every year). In other words, the vaccines were originally developed as yearly dosing, and despite the huge development of medical knowledge over the years since vaccines were developed, there has been little research into how frequently dogs actually need to

be vaccinated to maintain resistance to disease. Of course, it is to the advantage of the vaccine companies to maintain a yearly dosing schedule on their vaccine labels, as they will therefore have a renewable source of income each year. Secondly, I have heard veterinarians argue that clients will not come in for yearly physical examinations alone; in other words, the requirement of a yearly vaccine is an “incentive” to get people to maintain yearly office visits and physical exams. Again, this is a poor argument, not giving enough credit to the general public to care for their pets.

As a breeder, I have lost one of my best poodle friends at the age of 5 years to ITP. His case was caused by ehrlichiosis, but perhaps his immune system was in disrepair because of frequent vaccinations and this pre-disposed him to be unable to fight off the disease. I will never know. I do know that because of this loss, and in researching the state of over-vaccination in the U.S., I changed the way I vaccinate my dogs as a breeder and what I recommend to my clients as a veterinarian. I vaccinate my puppies for distemper, parvovirus, parainfluenza, and adenovirus at 9, 12, and 16 weeks of age. I do not vaccinate for coronavirus, bordetella, or leptospirosis. I do vaccinate for Lyme disease because I live in an endemic area. I vaccinate for rabies after 20 weeks of age (usually around 6 months). I never give more than one vaccine at a time. I do a one year booster and then I never vaccinate again except for rabies, which is required by law to be boosted every 3 years. I do, however, perform yearly titers to be sure that my dogs have maintained a level of antibodies in their bloodstream which has been determined to be sufficient (although this is also controversial). I currently have several dogs which have not been vaccinated (other than rabies) since they were a little over a year of age, and yet they have maintained adequate titers – the oldest poodle is currently 11 years of age.

As a veterinarian, my thinking is a bit on the radical side, although Dr. Jean Dodds, a prominent veterinary immunologist who resides in California, has published several articles on the state of over-vaccination in this country, and her recommendations for vaccination protocols. The problem with the vaccine situation is that owners and breeders alike would have to be completely re-educated in the necessity of vaccines, while at the same time maintaining yearly physical examinations in order to check for any other health problems. At the hospital in which I currently practice, the three veterinarians there have agreed to recommend puppy vaccines at 8-9, 12, and 16 weeks, with a rabies vaccine anytime after 12 weeks (per state of Connecticut law). We then recommend a one year booster and then boosters every 3 years afterwards.

There are studies which support a three year rather than one year protocol, but there are none currently published which support yearly titers without further vaccinations unless titers drop. I will note that my veterinary colleagues do not agree with me on my protocol and argue that if one of my dogs was challenged with parvovirus or distemper, I might lose them. I would argue that my dogs have a healthier immune system without the constant challenge of vaccines, and that they would be more likely to survive a challenge to their systems on diseases which are more prevalent, such as tick-borne or bacterial diseases, to which they might be exposed every spring, summer, and autumn. In any case, I could go on in detail about the pros and cons of vaccinations versus titers, but the bottom line is that both breeders and veterinarians need more research and more education, rather than just blindly vaccinating dogs every year because “that’s how it’s always been done.” Of course, importing and exporting dogs and the requirements determined by each country, may also affect the vaccine protocol of choice. It should also be noted that running titers every year is more expensive than simply vaccinating, which can be an issue for many people.

While supporting the benefits of a raw food diet and limited vaccinations has caused controversy among my veterinary colleagues, one of the main subjects which causes a controversy in my life as a breeder is breeding in general. Sadly, nearly every week, and sometimes every day that I am at work, I have to euthanize a dog or cat. Sometimes these are beloved pets that are part of the family and have lived a good, long life and are now ill or otherwise suffering. And sometimes these are animals which just are no longer “convenient.” I see animals that were dropped off at the dog pound, or were so mistreated, malnourished and poorly cared for that euthanasia was the only option. The overpopulation of dogs and cats in the United States is heart-wrenching and yet, as a breeder, I am contributing to the population. It can be a difficult dilemma.

I believe I am a good breeder, trying to make a better poodle through my own vision of the standard, trying to breed healthy, happy dogs and choose good owners for them. I require puppy buyers to sign a spay/neuter contract and I guarantee my puppies for health and temperament issues. I also guarantee that any puppy can be returned to me at any point in his/her life, for any reason, and I will either keep or find a new home for them. But sadly, there are so few people who truly breed for the betterment of the dog, rather than for profit or to have a “famous” dog. How many times have I met an indiscriminate individual who breeds a litter for money or other terrible reason? How many times have I had to hold my tongue and treat their dogs with their skin problems, hip dysplasia, etc. because they have come to me as a doctor and don’t really want to hear my opinions as a breeder? It has been too many times to count. I have been torn between maintaining a professional demeanor as a veterinarian, and telling them what I really think of them as a breeder. I do encourage all of my clients to spay and neuter their dogs; even conformation champions should be spayed and neutered when their breeding days are over, for health reasons if for none other.

On the flip side of the general public practicing poor breeding ethics, there are the veterinarians who practice poor quality medicine. When a puppy buyer discusses with me how to choose a veterinarian, first and foremost, I recommend word of mouth. Going to a veterinarian with a good reputation within the general community and perhaps show dog community, is much more reliable than picking one out of the telephone book. I tell puppy buyers they should choose a veterinarian like they would choose a doctor for themselves. No doctor is perfect, but some are definitely better than others, particularly for specialty practices. If you are a quality breeder, interested in genetics, reproduction, optimizing fertility, etc, finding a veterinarian experienced in these areas may be like looking for a needle in a haystack.

When a client comes to me wanting advice on how to become a breeder, my first thought is “don’t do it.” There are too many people out there who already do it wrong. I see them every day, with their sick puppies, over-bred bitches that look at me with soulful eyes, stud dogs that would bite you as soon as you look at them in what they perceive as “the wrong way.” I see male clients who think that their dog being neutered is akin to them being neutered personally. So many thoughts pass through my head, puppies who never get the chance to take their first breath, bitches who die in whelp due to complications, young bitches bred before they are ready, who reject the puppies or kill them outright, stud dogs who are bred to anything that stands still long enough. And I could go on. These are my experiences as a breeder *and* a veterinarian.

And then there is the good side of breeding from those who do it right – gorgeous, healthy dogs who are family members in their own right. The scent of puppy breath in a sweet yawn, those first shrill cries from a puppy at birth, watching the wonder of a new life and all there is to discover. Puppies that grow from sweet, stumbling little babies to beautiful, proud

show dogs, family members, performance athletes, etc. There is no greater reward as a breeder than to see one of your puppies become an important family member, just as satisfying as one who becomes a performance or conformation powerhouse, or all three if one is incredibly blessed.

So, when a client comes to me as a veterinarian, wanting advice on how to become a breeder, I tell them first and foremost: education. You must learn all that you can about your breed, from books, other breeders, observation at dog shows, etc. Then, you must research. You should be breeding for the right reasons, and if you aren't, then you shouldn't be breeding at all. Just like a good veterinarian often has to research symptoms, run laboratory tests, review medical journals, etc. a good breeder should research pedigrees, genetic diseases and how they are inherited (if known) in their breed, and hopefully have access to a mentor with a depth of knowledge and willingness to teach. A good breeder should consult with an experienced veterinarian on genetic testing available, how to obtain genetic information, and on reproduction and fertility issues as well as the general health of their dogs.

As a breeder and a veterinarian I revel in the success of poodles, as well as despair at their downfall. How amazing to see a dog like Multi Champion Topscore Contradiction (King), a poodle of great renown in Europe, who has won Crufts, the World Dog Show, Amsterdam, etc. He then flew across the ocean to compete in the greatest Poodle show in the United States, the Poodle Club of America National Specialty, at which he went winners dog in Standards and went on to complete his American championship with three Bests in Show in a row! At the same time he is a well-loved family pet, cared for as an important family member by Kari and Stein Glenna, whom I had the privilege to meet at PCA. I have heard King may reward U.S. fans with an encore presentation at the Westminster Kennel Club dog show and who knows what he might do there? And at that same Poodle Club of America, the Best in Show winner was Multi Champion Cotian Style and Splash, an international dog in her own right. Tasha was conceived in Sweden, whelped in Australia, completed American and Australian championships and with an owner from Brazil, she has ties to at least 4 continents!

One goes from the very highs of success to the very lows of over-breeding. What do I see as a veterinarian but poodles bred to every other breed imaginable. With several sizes to choose from puppy mills have a great variety of breeds to mix with the poodle to obtain the next cute little bundle of joy (in their opinion). I have seen standard poodles mixed with Labrador and golden retrievers – known as labradoodles and goldendoodles, respectively, but really, are just another mixed breed mistake. Then there are the cockapoos, peek-a-poos, Lhasa-poos, and Schnoodles, derived from the miniature and dwarf varieties of poodle combined with Cocker Spaniels, Pekinese, Lhasa Apso, and Miniature Schnauzer as you can probably guess from the names. Finally, in the toy column, one can obtain shih-poos, yorkie-poos, and pug-a-poos, to name a few, derived from toy poodles combined with the Shih Tzu, Yorkshire Terrier, and Pug breeds, respectively. The amount of genetic problems I see when encountering one of these mixed breed puppies is astounding. Even more astounding are the owners who mistakenly believe they have a “pure” bred dog, overlooking the fact that the name of the dog itself is a mix of two breeds! And yes, I know labradoodles are a registered breed in at least one country, I just don't agree with it.

There may be some breeds, with very limited gene pools around the world that may benefit from judicious breeding with another, closely related breed. This is, of course, extremely controversial. The poodle, however, is not one of them. As a veterinarian and a breeder, I am excited by the fact that genetics and reproduction have progressed to the point that we have

frozen and fresh chilled semen as options for breeding dogs which are geographically impossible to get together physically. The gene pool for the poodle is not in jeopardy of being too small, if importation of semen and/or the dogs themselves are possible. When viewing the quality of poodles in so many countries, it is wonderful to see dogs that can be appreciated by more than one venue. At the Poodle Club of America National Specialty, poodles were exhibited from all over the United States as well as other countries, and it is amazing that we are able to “import” bloodlines without necessarily involving shipping the dogs. Likewise it is gratifying to see so many American lines which have been successfully bred into European, Australian, English, Japanese and other bloodlines to produce poodles of quality and grace.

Overall, my life is very fulfilling as a breeder and a veterinarian. I have eight American champions to date (two of which are also Canadian champions) with two more close to completing their championships and four others pointed or beginning their show careers. I also have dogs titled in obedience and agility, and at least two puppies which went on to become service dogs. I have a new litter of puppies with great promise and have had the opportunity to co-breed or co-own with several wonderful people, including Kaylen, KaVa, Majessa, and Lauris Standard Poodles in the United States, and with Alias in Canada. I am part of a very busy veterinary practice in southeastern Connecticut and specialize in canine reproduction and genetics. I am also blessed with four year old twin boys who are growing up, like I did, with poodles all around them. I have converted my husband into a poodle aficionado and he helps care for and bathe our pack of poodles. So as a breeder, veterinarian, wife, and mother, I wouldn't have it any other way.