

Born for a life of pain:

They look so adorable. But spaniels loved by owners including Strictly's Craig Revel Horwood are being cynically bred with horrifying defects

- **Craig Revel Horwood is devoted to Cavalier King Charles Spaniel Sophie**
- **But she has now been diagnosed with a common but fatal breed complaint**
- **Even breeders admit certain breeds have become riddled with problems**
- **The BBC TV judge is now backing calls for mandatory puppy testing**

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Craig Revel Horwood plays the pantomime villain on Strictly Come Dancing, but there is someone to whom he would never award anything less than a ten. His dog Sophie.

The BBC TV judge confesses to being 'unbelievably in love' with the Cavalier King Charles Spaniel, rescued by his partner, Damon Scott, five years ago.

'I have never been broody for children,' says Mr Horwood, 'so it comes as a complete surprise to find out how much I love her.'

Sadly, that happy state of affairs may end soon. Sophie shares a curse common to many Cavaliers: a diseased heart. Now, despite a regime involving eight tablets a day, Sophie is unlikely to survive for very much longer.

'I am so upset,' says Mr Horwood. 'You know it's imminent, but you have to take one day at a time and enjoy it.'



Craig Revel Horwood (pictured with dog Sophie) confesses to being 'unbelievably in love' his the Cavalier King Charles Spaniel and is heartbroken after she was diagnosed with a diseased heart

Sophie's condition highlights a serious issue — one that sheds light on modern attitudes to animal welfare.

For centuries, mankind has been refining descendants of the wolf into ever-more-specialised breeds of dog.

Many of them are prey to some particular illness or other, but some varieties are so riddled with inherited defects that even breed enthusiasts are calling for action to combat the problem — either by mixing them with other breeds or by getting rid of them altogether.

And so it is with the Cavalier King Charles Spaniel.

The breed is a longer-nosed version of the King Charles Spaniel and the result of an attempt in the 1920s to create a prettier dog from a small pool of 'founder' animals.

Mild of temperament, the Cavalier is the pet of choice for many families, and last year some 5,100 puppies were registered with the Kennel Club — the nearest thing to a regulator in the dog world. Famous owners have included Princess Margaret, Ronald Reagan and Frank Sinatra.



Sophie shares a curse common to many Cavaliers: Mitral Valve Disease which is fatal for the animals

But that cute little head masks a terrible problem.

'I cannot support the breeding of Cavaliers and will, sadly, not be getting another,' says Carol Fowler, a former owner. 'I don't believe human selfishness should mean that animals suffer.'

Cavaliers disproportionately suffer from two major defects. The first is Mitral Valve Disease (MVD), in which one of the valves controlling blood flow through the heart shrivels over time, reducing the amount of blood pumped into the body. Affected dogs can end up struggling for breath, before finally dying of the disease.

The second is a very distressing condition called Syringomyelia (SM). Put simply, this involves the brain being too big for the skull. As a result, the brain squeezes through the opening leading to the spinal cord, causing fluid in the spine to press on nerves, resulting in pain and disability.

Critics of the Cavalier breeding fraternity ascribe this suffering, in part at least, to the quest for a dog with a puppy-like appearance.

'Years of breeding for a prettier head has resulted in too small a skull,' says Margaret Carter, a one-time Cavalier breeder. 'Seventy per cent of Cavaliers will have gone on to develop SM by the age of six.'

She has witnessed the consequences at first hand.

'My Cavalier was a top stud dog, and he started showing signs of SM at the age of 11,' she says. 'It got so bad that he ended up screaming with pain. It couldn't be controlled and he had to be put down.'



But it is not just Cavalier King Charles Spaniels which are prone to hereditary problems, Labrador Retrievers (pictured) are especially likely to develop obesity which leads to a collection of other health problems

Ms Fowler endured a similar experience to Mrs Carter with her first Cavalier, called Bonnie.

'Bonnie had to be put to sleep aged five as a result of unbearable pain,' she says. 'It broke my heart to know how much she'd suffered during her short life, and how little I could do for her.'

'I foolishly got another Cavalier, Rosie, only to find out through an MRI scan that she, too, had SM. She fared better as a result of early surgery and drug treatment, but developed MVD and died aged 11.'

Mrs Carter was a leading light in the Cavalier Breeders Club until removed from her position as spokesman on health in 2008. Her crime was to say in a BBC TV documentary that she had seen a scan confirming that a champion Cavalier, which had sired many litters, suffered from SM.

Dog breeding and showing are, she says, 'almost like a cult — a kind of brainwashing. People know that inbreeding is dangerous in humans, but somehow don't see that it's dangerous in animals.

'There is a kind of code of silence that you do not talk about health problems in your breed,' she adds. 'It's about status. It's about not wanting to have to remove your best dog from the show ring or your breeding programme; about puppy sales and stud fees; it's about prestige.'

Today, Mrs Carter and Ms Fowler are pressing for the Kennel Club to refuse to register Cavalier puppies whose parents have not had MRI scans on their skulls and tests on their heart. The Kennel Club began a voluntary testing scheme in 2012, but up to November 2014 only 200 owners had submitted their animals for inspection.

Mrs Carter says breeders avoid it because results are published, but the club claims that there is doubt about the effectiveness of screening in reducing SM and MVD.



Cavaliers (left) are also prone to Syringomyelia, a painful condition where the skull is simply too small for the skull, while the Pug breed (right) are prone to eye damage while their short faces gives them breathing difficulties

Bill Lambert, the Kennel Club's health manager, says: 'We have no powers as such, except the power to encourage and educate. In terms of breeding to produce exaggerated features, we have tried to control this through the show ring, and we believe we are beginning to have some success.

'One of the ways we deal with this is to put the health of the dog to the forefront in competition.'

People supporting the campaign for mandatory MRI scans and heart testing can add their names to an online petition on [Change.org](https://www.change.org).

Mr Revel Horwood and his partner have now come out in support of mandatory testing for Cavaliers before puppies can be registered.

In his entry on the petition, the Strictly judge writes: 'My partner, Damon, and I have a 13-year-old King Charles Cavalier called Sophie. She is the most beautiful little girl.

'But she has a lot of health issues that mean she's on full-time medication. There needs to be a law put in place to make sure Cavaliers are MRI-scanned and heart-tested before breeding.'

In response to the criticism, breeders say they are being unfairly persecuted. Sheena Maclaine, chairman of the Cavalier Breeders Club, says her members love their dogs, and she denies that incestuous breeding is widespread.

Mrs Maclaine, who has 29 Cavaliers, two of them suffering from SM, says: 'People who have done the campaigning have almost witch-hunted certain kennels and breeders. That has effectively driven people underground, away from scanning centres that publish the results of those scans.' Even dogs whose MRI tests give them a 'clear' bill of health can still produce a problem puppy, she argues, and she does not believe that head shape is the issue.



The German Shepherd (pictured like many large breeds, are prone to hip dysplasia which causes pain, arthritis, and problems walking

While acknowledging that SM can cause 'dreadful' pain, she questions whether the percentage of dogs that suffer such pain 'would even be recognisable'.

'The Cavalier is one of the wussiest breeds, so if you comb its ears and catch a hair tangle it will scream,' she says.

Dan O'Neill, a vet who has undertaken a study for the RSPCA on genetic conditions in dogs, is promoting more understanding of canine-inherited disease through the new Vetcompass project, in which vets share the results of screening.

He warns: 'If we want to keep the breed — and Cavaliers are beautiful and adorable dogs — we have to breed away from it very gradually or we could end up introducing a new set of problems.'

Ultimately, he suggests the broader public's attitudes to pedigree dogs may need to undergo a shift.

'A lot of the decisions about how dogs look are not driven by the Kennel Club, they are driven by the public,' he says. 'Flavours of the month at the moment are Pugs and French Bulldogs. Both can suffer from breathing problems because of their noses.'

Mrs Carter has now set up the Companion Cavalier Club, and offers advice on how to reduce the risk of genetic disease.

'I believe the only way to save the Cavalier is to out-cross it to another breed,' she says. 'But as far as breeders are concerned, the product would be a mongrel.'