WHAT DISORDERS DO UK PEDIGREE DOGS AND CATS REALLY ACQUIRE?

ALTHOUGH it has long been suspected that pedigree dog and cat breeding programmes were progressively creating a range of health problems for our modern pets (McGreevy and Nicholas, 1999), it was in August 2008 that this subject truly hit the media headlines. The BBC aired a 60-minute documentary, Pedigree Dogs Exposed, which continues to affect the pedigree dog world today. The programme included footage of a cavalier King Charles spaniel with syringomyelia apparently writhing in agony and a pug with brachycephalic airway disease appearing to gasp for breath.

The programme emphasised an association between some pedigree breed standards and poor animal welfare. For instance, the dermoid sinus condition in the Rhodesian ridgeback was highlighted.

Dermoid sinus is relatively common in ridged dogs, but rare in unridged breed members (Kilberts and Anderson, 2006). The programme expressed the belief that the common practice of inbreeding (also called linebreeding) to “fix” certain breed attributes resulted in reduced genetic diversity in the breeds and an increase in inherited disease expression.

For one of the authors (Dan O’Neill), who was running his own small animal practice in Kent at the time, the subsequent weeks and months saw a remarkable interest in this topic from the pet-owning public. It was evident that inherited disease was perceived as a major welfare issue by the public, but it was not clear what steps the veterinary profession was taking to protect patients — or even if the information existed to define the scope of the problem.

Do we really have prevalence levels for disorders between breeds? (Figures 1 and 2)? However, what was without doubt was that clients expected their veterinary surgeons and practices to take the matter seriously and get involved in finding a solution.

Indeed, this growing welfare issue was one of the main drivers for Dan O’Neill to forgo general practice and return to the academic world to undertake a PhD at the RVC into the epidemiology of acquired and inherited disorders in cats and dogs. This article offers us the opportunity to contribute to a better future for breed welfare, but without having to make such a drastic life choice.

In the aftermath of the BBC broadcast, three major reports were commissioned independently by the RSPCA, the Dogs Trust/Kennel Club and the Associate Parliamentary Group for Animal Welfare (APGAW). These reports examined the influence of pedigree dog breeding policies on the health and welfare of pedigree dogs.

Each of these reports, Pedigree Dog Breeding in The UK: A Major Welfare Concern? (Rooney and Sargin, 2008), Independent Inquiry into Dog Breeding (Batson, 2010) and A Healthier Future For Pedigree Dogs (APGAW, 2009), concluded that some current pedigree breeding practices were detrimental to the welfare of pedigree dogs, and made a series of recommendations for improving pedigree dog health and welfare.

A theme common to each of these detailed reports was the current dearth of data on the specific types and levels of disorders affecting pure and crossbred dogs, and the consequent limitations for evidence-based solutions to this hugely important problem.

Establishing the true prevalence of inherited disease using anonymised veterinary diagnostic data was unanimously identified as a key step towards the long-term improvement in pedigree pets’ health and welfare. All three reports recommended founding a national database to amass and collate reliable large-scale data on disorders in domestic dogs.

Indeed, although the independent authors of the RSPCA-commissioned report proposed 36 different recommendations to improve the welfare of pedigree dogs, the highest priority recommendation was to protect patients – or even if it was not clear what steps the veterinary profession was taking to protect patients — or even if the information existed to define the scope of the problem.
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Mandonat was considered to be “the systematic collection of data on inherited diseases suffered by dogs”.

**One solution**

In direct response to these recommendations, an RVC and University of Sydney collaboration began a three-year PhD study that aims to provide robust data on disease levels in pedigree dogs and cats, and is funded by the RSPCA.

In conjunction with leading providers of veterinary electronic practice management systems (PMS) and as many willing partner veterinary practices as possible across the UK, this project aims to capture the clinical experience of small animal practitioners by collating and analysing their electronic patient records. Epidemiological analyses will then generate reliable up-to-date and ongoing information on the levels and risk factors for inherited and acquired disorders in dogs and cats.

**The project**

In 2007, the RVC established the Veterinary Electronic Animal Record (VEctAR) animal surveillance programme for health surveillance in UK companion animals. VEctAR aims to capture first opinion clinical data via electronic patient records held in practices’ PMS, enabling the completion of regional demographic assessments, disease prevalence studies and risk factor analysis (VEctAR, 2010).

The project was piloted in collaboration with a PMS provider, RxWorks, in a small sample of practices. Now, the large-scale recruitment of practices across the UK, which use any one from a wide range of PMSs, is being undertaken.

To date, much of the limited current prevalence data have been derived from referral casebooks, which may be poorly representative of true overall national levels. The central aim of the project is to collect robust data from a broad cross-section of practice types, with as diverse geographical locations as possible, thereby ensuring the results will be truly representative of the UK dog and cat population.

**The process**

An invitation is now extended to all UK veterinary practices that treat dogs and cats to consider participating in the VEctAR project.

Depending upon their PMS, practices may be able to opt-in immediately, but there may be a delay until the PMS system of a particular practice is compatible with VEctAR requirements.

Following acceptance to participate in VEctAR and contribute to the future direction of veterinary medicine, a standardised list of summary diagnoses (the VeNom codes) will be embedded within the practice’s PMS. Indeed, these codes are already present by default in practice PMS and are likely to become an industry standard over time.

The objective is to link the clinical data that you already routinely collect with your choice from a list of summary diagnoses with minimal alteration to your current recording methods.

**Inclusion criteria**

The VeNom codes have been developed by a multidisciplinary group, the VeNom Coding Group. It consists of veterinary clinical, epidemiological and IT specialists based at the majority of the UK’s veterinary schools and aims to promote and standardise veterinary diagnostic nomenclature (The VeNom Coding Group, 2010). The only change to your current procedure is that, at the end of each clinical case episode, an appropriate summary term is selected to best describe the case diagnosis or reason for the visit. Where the diagnosis is uncertain, a term can be selected from a list of “presenting complaints” instead. The actual full list of terms is extensive, but is hidden in the PMS while working in the patient record.

**Pros**

- An extending time period will augment the ability to recognise trends and help forecast future direction in the practice.
- Despite the many benefits to practice, participation is zero. The summary terms list will be added to your system by your PMS provider. Adoption of the changes by staff is simple, involving merely a single extra selection of a diagnosis or presenting complaint at the end of each consultation.

**Benefits**

- Participation offers both clinical (Table 1) and management (Table 2) benefits to your practice. As the project evolves, further applications from participation are likely to accrue.
- The existence of data over an extending time period will enable the ability to forecast future directions in the practice.

**What next?**

If you are suitably energised by the ideas behind this project and would like to explore it further, we would recommend visiting the VEctAR website (www.rvc.ac.uk/VEctAR), where more detailed information about the project can be found, as well as sample outputs.

To express an interest in joining the growing VEctAR community, please contact Dan veterinary at donel1@rvc.ac.uk or telephone 07775 057161.

**References**


The VeNom Coding Group (2010). www.venomcoding.org


**Gibbens issues cattle tail docking reminder**

**INSPECTORS from the Animal Health and Veterinary Laboratories Agency (AHVLA) have commended a small number of cases of cattle with docked tails.**

A spokesman for the agency said that the calves had been “docked in the mistaken belief it improved hygiene.”

“Tail docking on welfare grounds is illegal in the UK. Surgery to remove part of the tail of cattle must only be performed by a veterinarian as a therapeu- tic action and in response to an injury or disease.”

Veterinary practice officer Nigel Gibbens said: “Tail docking is unneces- sary, as there are no discernible benefits for either cattle or humans.”

“It has never been traditionally practised in the UK, so we want to remind people about its illegality now to nip it in the bud.”

**References**


Gibbens issues cattle tail docking reminder

Figure 3. An example of the advanced search window in RxWorks showing the ease of summary term selection.