CANINE WELFARE

Independent veterinary checks at Crufts

As colleagues may be aware, Crufts 2012 saw a groundbreaking initiative in the world of pedigree dogs: the launch of the veterinary examination of 15 high-profile breeds before confirmation of their ‘Best of Breed’ awards. Under this scheme, championship show winners belonging to these breeds must be examined by an independent vet before their awards are confirmed and they can proceed to further competition. We are the two vets who were chosen to carry out these checks for the first time.

As a profession, vets are quick to criticise the world of pedigree dogs in general, and the Kennel Club (KC) in particular, for breeding practices and attitudes that are felt to compromise welfare. This new KC initiative is enormously controversial, and we should be equally ready to support those at the KC who have been brave enough to push through this innovation, against great opposition from many very influential figures in the dog world. As both chairman of the KC and a vet, Steve Dean is uniquely placed to have spearheaded this change of culture, and we should be proud to assist him and the other KC members who have been courageous enough to take this step. In particular, we feel that the new process will gain far more credibility with the breeders if it is implemented by as many different vets as possible.

Henceforth, vets will be asked to carry out these checks on the high-profile breed winners at all championship shows. The process is quite clear: the KC health team has produced an excellent illustrated booklet, which concisely states the areas of concern for each breed. We are not meant to judge the dog as a specimen of its breed, but merely to evaluate it to establish whether any visible aspect of its conformation or soundness has led to health problems that compromise its welfare. This examination is quite straightforward for any experienced general practitioner, and we both found that our decisions were quite clear-cut, for various reasons, in every dog that we examined on this occasion.

It would, however, be advisable if any vet who is likely to be undertaking these veterinary checks in the future to contact the KC to discuss the criteria for these inspections. Some conflict and confusion has arisen with regard to some failed dogs having clear eye certificates, which has been clarified by the

statement made by Ian Mason the chief panellist for the BVA/KC/ISDS eye scheme. This statement is available on the BVA website at www.bva.co.uk/news/2756.aspx

While the KC gave us great support, no attempt whatsoever was made to influence our decisions in any way: we could have passed or failed each and every one of the 15 dogs quite freely. We think that the scheme is already beginning to show its worth, in that we both examined (and passed) some healthy, moderate specimens of controversial breeds, which had obviously been chosen by the judges with due consideration of health issues. If, over the forthcoming months, other vets (and judges) make similar decisions, we think there is real hope that attitudes will change within the dog show world to promote the selection of less extreme conformation, with consequent enormous benefits to the welfare of the dogs concerned.

The fact that the KC gave two ordinary general practitioners the authority to overrule the decisions of internationally famous judges at the world’s biggest dog show, and trusted us to make impartial decisions about the dogs we examined, is a great mark of confidence in the integrity and ethics of our profession. We should not let them down. We very much hope that many other vets will support the KC by volunteering to carry out these checks at a championship show. We are both very happy to talk to any colleague who might be interested in doing so.

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