

## Give and Let Dogs Live

### **Canine health research depends on donations.**

*D. Caroline Coile, Ph.D.*

Earlier this year, the Rottweiler Health Foundation and the Bernese Mountain Dog Club of America (BMDCA) pledged a combined \$100,000 toward research for specific types of canine cancer that affect their breeds. Perhaps that's not so surprising for a fairly popular breed like the Rottweiler (American Kennel Club rank No. 15), but how does a less-popular breed like the Bernese Mountain Dog (AKC rank No. 41) come up with so much money?

#### Motivated to donate

Over the years Berner folk have raised more than \$350,000, with the majority of that money going to support health research. Berner owners are motivated by their desire to wipe out malignant histiocytosis, a widespread, fast-acting cancer that's largely to blame for the Berner's short average lifespan (only 7.1 years). As BMDCA member Joye Neff says, "If you've been in the breed for any time, you've either lost a Berner to histiocytosis or know someone who has."

Pet owners with just one or two dogs are often more likely than breeders with multi-dog households to notice slight changes in their dogs, spend lots of money on diagnostics and publicize any findings, Neff says. Perhaps this is because they spend more one-on-one time with each dog, can afford to spend more per dog on veterinary care and are not encumbered by the threat that others will blackball their lines if they announce a genetic problem.

This points to the importance of keeping in touch with pet owners and making sure they're involved with other Berner owners. The Berner-L internet list, which has more than 2,000 members, including a large number of pet owners, is the BMDCA's major source of news about fundraising drives and research projects. Neff's fundraising method is simple: "I beg," she says.

Besides begging, many clubs hold auctions and raffles at both local and regional specialties, and hold online events, which allow more people who live at a distance to participate.

#### Concerted effort

Equally as important as involving pet people is involving international fanciers. In rare breeds, most lines are so interrelated that what affects a breed in one country also affects it in every other country.

Rather than duplicating research efforts, it's more productive for people and clubs worldwide to pool their resources and have a major animal health funding organization, such as the Morris Animal Foundation (MAF) or the AKC Canine Health Foundation (CHF), oversee the money and make suggestions for appropriate research studies.

Research studies typically cost between \$35,000 and \$300,000, far exceeding the funding means of most small breed clubs. That's another advantage of working through the CHF or MAF. The CHF offers the Donor Advised Fund, which allows the donor to designate how the money will be used, and also allows several groups with similar goals to pool their money, even with amounts as little as \$2,000.

The CHF alerts the club to research projects that meet its criteria, and if the club agrees to put its funds toward that project, the club receives regular progress reports on the research. The MAF website allows clubs and individuals to select from a menu of ongoing research projects, which they can cosponsor for as little as \$3,000.

Matching funds make a huge difference. The last check the Berner Lovers Donor Advised Fund wrote was for \$41,600, but because it was matched by the CHF, they were able to provide \$83,200 toward histiocytosis and other cancer research relevant to their breed.

"Berner owners are much like their dogs," Ness says. "Gentle, loving and very giving." With the help of such giving owners, two different grants have already yielded promising breakthroughs regarding malignant histiocytosis – and with them, the hope of a longer life together with their dogs.

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