

Fit for Function – Fit for Life Health Clinics for Pekingese

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years the Pekingese experienced a decline in popularity and consequently registrations have dropped dramatically. Even more worrying is the fact that parts of the general public and certain quarters of the dog fraternity seem to associate the breed with various health issues. Sensationalist press reports of “face-lifted” top-winning dogs, the open use of ice-packs at shows and the occasional appearance of a BOB winning Peke struggling to make it through the Group ring, regrettably fuelled criticism against the breed.

Veterinary literature indeed mentions various conditions which might affect the health of Pekingese and the KC used its health survey to point out allegedly weak points in the breed.

A number of breed clubs discussed these serious threats for the breed and it was decided to initiate “health clinics” at shows to establish if the allegations of serious health issues were justified.

Based on a similar scheme used successfully by various Bulldog Clubs, a Pekingese specific health check list was created. This health test was based on a clinical examination by a Veterinary Surgeon concentrating on potentially weak points in the breed. The owners were given a certificate and there was no pass or fail. The main purpose was to give the owner a statement of the dog’s health and guidance for future breeding plans. In addition the analysis of the collated data should help to find out if there are serious health issues in the breed and how common they are. The examinations were offered at Clubshows and were free of charge. The concept was deliberately kept simple and as free of bureaucracy as possible. The identity of the examined dog was of no interest for the examiner and was at no point revealed. However in the future it would be recommended to issue certificates only to dogs which have been micro-chipped.

MATERIAL

All findings are based on my own clinical judgment and my personal interpretation of the breed standard.

Over a period of 2 years I attended 4 Pekingese Clubshows (2 Championship and 2 Open Shows) in different parts of the country and I examined 138 dogs. The age varied from 4 months to 12 years and the majority of dogs were between 1 and 5 years old

Despite best efforts to use the same level of clinical conduct for each dog the examination was to a certain extent open to individual interpretation. As this service was offered on a completely voluntarily basis critics might argue that owners might have “pre-selected” their stock and only provided healthy dogs without known problems for examination. However most owners seemed to be genuinely interested and often confirmed that a certain finding has already been diagnosed by their own vets.

Although the testing was offered to pets and show dogs alike a high percentage of examined dogs were show dogs and one could argue that the findings only reflect the condition of a rather small percentage of the breed’s population. On the other hand one would suppose that successfully shown dogs are more likely to be used for breeding and therefore the findings should be significant for the future of the breed in general.

RESULTS

Eyes

114 dogs (82%) showed no abnormalities on external clinical examination. 9 dogs showed very large protruding eyes and 5 dogs showed evidence of corneal changes with scar tissue or keratitis pigmentosa.

These encouraging findings might be slightly too optimistic considering that eye-injuries usually curtails a dogs show carrier and most examined dogs were still shown. Therefore the percentage of eye injuries might be higher in a group based on retired show dogs and pets.

Overnose wrinkle

89 dogs had a normal overnose wrinkle, either broken or continuing. 39 dogs (almost 44%) showed an excessive overnose wrinkle. Although most affected dogs did not show any clinical symptoms, in a number of cases the hair of the over-nose wrinkle was uncomfortably close to the surface of the eye and potentially could cause irritation and injury to the eye.

To a lesser extent in some dogs the large over-nose wrinkle was partially blocking the nostrils.

Nostrils

64 dogs showed desirable open nostrils allowing free flow of air. Almost as many dogs (61) showed slightly narrow nostrils often in combination with a small nose-pad. 3 dogs showed severely stenotic nostrils.

I found it rather worrying that such a high percentage of dogs were affected by this condition, which is part of “Brachycephalic Airway Obstruction Syndrome” (BAOS). The size of the nose and the openness of nostrils are the only part of the airways which can be assessed by external examination and are of essential importance for a dog’s ability to breathe freely. As expected the few dogs with extremely narrow nostrils showed symptoms of breathing difficulties with noisy rasping breathing. Interestingly enough all dogs with slightly stenotic nostrils could cope well in the show environment and did not show any breathing difficulties when moved. However as the majority of dogs were of a young age and BAOS is a condition which can progress with age I would be worried that a percentage of these dogs will develop breathing difficulties at a later stage. It appears that the selection for big noses with wide open nostrils has to be a main target for breeders to avoid breathing difficulties.

Forelegs

The majority of dogs had strong well angulated front legs. Only 14% of dogs appeared to be loose in elbow and one dog as a result had problems walking. Some affected dogs were young puppies whose joints still might tighten with age.

Spine

The external assessment of the spine by palpation can only give a very basic assessment and can not claim to give definitive evidence for or against orthopaedic problems. Most dogs showed no palpable abnormality of their spine. 14 dogs showed roached backs. A firm strong back can not guarantee complete clearness of spinal problems. Vice versa a roached back is not necessary a signs of an orthopaedic abnormality. If there is evidence of a problem with “backs” in the breed this has to be addressed by the use of specific imaging techniques (X-ray, CT-scans etc).

Hind legs

Different to many other Toybreeds most Pekingese in this survey did not show signs of Patella luxation. In 10 dogs (7%) one or both patella could be moved by palpation. 2 dogs showed permanently luxated patella, both were fine-boned Sleeves and were not used for breeding.

The results for the soundness of hocks were far less satisfactory. 37 dogs (27%) showed weak hocks. The symptoms ranged from lack of angulation to slackness (“rubber-hocks”) and almost complete absence of ligament support.

Movement

Under show circumstances (walking up and down and in a circle) almost all dogs did well and did not show serious problems in their movement. Surprisingly enough even dogs with less than desirable construction managed reasonably well and a good number even showed the desired rolling gait. Unfortunately this kind of examination does not give any answers how weak hindquarters affect the movement over a longer period or how these dogs could cope with more strenuous exercise than just walking up and down a room.

Coat

Considering age, gender and colour variation I only found a very small amount of over-coated dogs. This is not a finding based on veterinary technique but solely based on my personal interpretation. Most dogs were shapely and had a harsh top coat and a sensible amount of under coat. I have certainly seen many more “overcoated” Pekingese at shows abroad. In some countries “the more coat the better” attitude seems to be the norm and may be achieved by most undesirable grooming techniques like wrapping of fringes and restricting exercise to prevent the coat from damage. Contrary to negative publicity it was most satisfying to see that most Pekingese in the UK are shown with a sensible amount of coat.

Cardiac Assessment

The heart assessment was part of the official examination at two of the four shows. However for my own interest I have also auscultated all dogs at the previous two shows. I only found 2 dogs (1.4%) with an audible murmur. One was a 10 year old veteran dog with a Grad 2/6 murmur most likely caused by age-related Mitral valve disease (MVD). According to the owner the dog did not show any signs of heart disease and was enjoying life without medication.

The other dog was an elderly recently rescued dog of unknown age and pedigree. This dog showed a Grad 3/6 murmur and was already on heart medication.

CONCLUSION

The Pekingese can look back on a long history of careful and selected breeding. The unique shape, conformation and independent character of the breed may appeal to many but might provoke resentment by others who favour a different type of dog.

For many years the breed has fulfilled its role as one of the most popular Toydogs and was equally in demand as much pampered pet as an attractive show dog. Due to the moods of fashion the Pekingese has been replaced by more fashionable breeds and today the breed is mainly kept by a rather small nucleus of mostly devoted long-term breeders, who in general understand the needs and characteristics of the breed.

I personally think that the breed is “fit for function – fit for life” and in many ways much healthier than its reputation. I did not find a high percentage of extremes which would be detrimental for the well being of the individual dogs. However due to the unique characteristics of the breed the challenge for breeders is much higher than in other breeds. It appears that in the Pekingese the line between acceptable and healthy and exaggerated and potentially unhealthy features is very fine and without most cautious consideration can be easily overstepped, resulting in negative effects on the health of affected dogs. In particular the selection for big noses with wide open nostrils has to be a main target for breeders to avoid breathing difficulties. On the same lines overnose wrinkles and the size of eyes must be kept at a sensible size to avoid exaggeration.

Although the Pekingese has not been designed to walk for miles, anatomically correct construction and sound movement are of essential importance and should be high on any breeders list of criteria's. In general the health clinics got a lot of positive feed-back and the majority of owners/breeders seem to agree that this is a valuable step forward to improve the health of the breed.

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