

IRISH WOLFHOUND HEALTH GROUP

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Mr W Lambert
The Kennel Club
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December 10, 2008

Dear Mr Lambert

Many thanks for coming to present to us on the 23rd November. It was much appreciated. We welcome your aim of having a more open and interactive dialogue with all breeds and look forward to that being the case. We were also pleased to hear that the KC realises that it needs to be more flexible in allowing some variations to make the ABS more breed specific. In that spirit, and as agreed in the meeting, we have put together this letter as a starting point for us to develop the ABS into something that is more breed specific and acceptable to us.

We have some general concerns with the scheme and some specific concerns about the Health issues which are set out below:

General:

Whilst we all understand your wish to have a scheme that encourages Best Practice in breeding across the board, both for the welfare of the dogs and the prospective owners, our own Code of Conduct already sets out what we consider to be the minimum of best practice within our own breed, which is, in fact, more stringent and specific than in the ABS.

This is especially so as most of us breed infrequently and would not meet some of the criteria set out in your Accolades – and these are often the people of longstanding and high regard in the breed.

We believe there is a danger that the ABS equates the quality of a breeder with quantity and with success in the show ring again – the things the KC has been criticized for in the

media. Just the number of litters, the number of stud book entries and the number of clubs you can belong to do not in themselves denote a good breeder or the best stock. They have little value or meaning in themselves.

The Irish Wolfhound is a specialist breed, it should not be bred indiscriminately and without ensuring that there are the right homes available for the puppies. As a breed we discourage breeding large numbers of litters and for commercial purposes only, to avoid future welfare and rescue issues – and to safeguard the integrity and health of the breed. One of our concerns is that the ABS does not discriminate against puppy farmers and we would like more stringent qualifying criteria.

We would like Irish Wolfhound ABS members to be FULL members of one of the IW breed Club/Societies, which would mean they had been in the breed for a minimum of 3 years, have been proposed and seconded by existing members, be known to the breed in some way and also, be likely to be being mentored by the breeder of their bitch/stud dog.

We feel that mentoring a newcomer from within the breed is more important than simply accrediting them with the ABS scheme. We believe Accreditation should be earned, not an automatic right. If the KC wants all breeders to adopt the spirit of the ABS scheme's Code of Practice/Excellence, surely, compliance with that should be applicable to all breeders as a minimum requirement to register puppies, whether or not they're in the ABS? Becoming a member of the ABS should be something that you achieve after several years of Best Practice.

As it currently stands, the KC has no way of knowing whether or not the breeders it puts on the ABS list have any meaningful experience or knowledge, but they are being given validation for this. We consider this could be misleading to the general public as the impression will be that they have the greater knowledge and experience and are breeding better, healthier puppies– puppy buyers, in all good faith, will see this as a KC recommendation, but it is something that cannot be proven.

They are also given priority on your PSR over more established and reputable breeders. As a breed, we do not put new breeders automatically onto our Puppy Lists, at the very least they must have been an Associate member for at least one year. Adding them straight onto a list confers on them a status and recognition that can't be justified.

We would like the ABS to refer to compliance with our own Code of Conduct as a requirement for membership to the ABS. That way they have to be part of the breed's community and operate Best Practices as we consider appropriate for the breed. Those that operate outside those criteria (usually puppy farmers) would not qualify for Accreditation. And those independent, one-off hobby breeders, without perhaps the experience and knowledge would be automatically directed to the breed's clubs and be given support and guidance through that. If the breed clubs are to 'police' their own breed within the scheme, this is the only way that we could see that being manageable.

Many of our concerns regarding, for example, frequency and number of litters, what ages the bitches can be bred, would be covered by our own Code of Conduct.

So, for us, a requirement to comply with the Breed's own Code of Conduct before membership to the ABS is allowed, and an agreement on the Health Issues, would go some way in allowing us support the scheme.

Health:

We feel it's important to stress that we believe that the Irish Wolfhound is probably one of the healthier giant breeds.

As you are already aware, we are a very proactive breed as far as Health Issues are concerned. We have a very open and caring culture and should a problem arise, we are very good at sharing the information and trying to find a solution globally.

Of the key diseases that can affect a wolfhound, most have some form of testing, risk analysis or research programme already in place. We know, that the three big 'killers' are Osteosarcoma, Heart Disease, (specifically DCM), and Bloat.

We have the IW Health Group in the UK, which comprises members of each of the breed clubs, set up specifically to look at health issues in a unified way. We have had Regular Heart Screening in place for 25 years and are currently rolling out the Regional Heart Testing Programme that makes this screening available to all wolfhound owners and breeders as an accessible cost. There is the Irish Wolfhound Study Database in the States that enables us to do a risk analysis on certain key conditions for a trial breeding, PRA being the main one. We have global co-operation and involvement in the various research programmes specific to wolfhounds, such as the Osteosarcoma research well underway with the AHT and the Anna Blom Dog Genome Study for Osteosarcoma in Sweden and we are looking into supporting the Antagene/LUPA project in Europe that is researching the genetic causes of DCM.

None of the above has yet discovered tests that can accurately help us avoid the conditions in our breeding programmes.

There are no compulsory testing schemes in place for wolfhounds as there isn't a high enough incidence in the breed of any one thing to warrant it. Any testing we might do is purely voluntary and on a needs basis, e.g. testing to ensure that a dog is heart clear before breeding, (it does not guarantee that a dog remains clear and the screening needs to be conducted on an annual basis); livershunt testing of puppies. We would not consider testing for something that might carry a high risk to the dog, and would only consider it if the results were likely to tell us categorically that we could avoid breeding on a problem.

Numerically, we're a small breed, with a small gene pool, so if being a member of the ABS is dependent on finding stud dogs that are also part of the scheme, we are reducing our options even further. We would not want to limit our options by penalizing breeders for using non ABS owned stud dogs – most responsible breeders will ensure that the stud dog complies with health concerns and must be allowed to make their own judgment in the best interests of health and longevity for the proposed litter.

Regarding permanent ID, many people are still unhappy with the use of microchips in the giant breeds, and are happier with DNA ID, but would need to be sure who 'owns' the DNA sample and how it might be used in the future, by whoever has access to it. At this stage permanent ID seems to be the least important aspect when registering a litter and we leave it to the breeder's own preference.

1. PRA – Current status: Requirement

Our Proposal: Recommendation if carrier lines are in the pedigree

This is one of the breed's success stories as the incidence in the breed is very low, due to the vigilance and sharing of information within the breed. It is not because people have tested for it.

The test that is available only tells you if a dog is affected or not, but cannot identify carrier status, so it cannot prevent you from possibly producing it. If a breeder knew that they had carrier lines in their pedigree then they would be advised to test their stock before breeding at an earlier age as the disease might not have shown up by this stage. However, unless you are aware of the carrier lines, this test would not prevent you possibly breeding with a carrier. As there are new people coming into the breed all the time and also those carrier lines disappearing off the 5 generation pedigree, it would be worthwhile keeping PRA at the forefront of our minds as a reminder to check our pedigrees thoroughly before going ahead.

The Irish Wolfhound Study's database can provide a Risk Analysis as it knows the carrier dogs, so this would be a more reliable way of helping you to breed with a reduced risk. There is also plenty of information in the public domain in the breed about those carrier lines and plenty of people who can help check out a pedigree. So we consider the emphasis should be on testing if you know there is a risk of carrier lines in your pedigree, to encourage a more in depth look at that aspect of the proposed mating.

2. Elbow Dysplasia – Current Status – Recommendation

Our Proposal: We would like it removed

This issue gives us the greatest problems. We believe it is completely unnecessary at this stage and that the reward does not outweigh the risk. If the breed felt there were a need to test for this condition, they would, but as yet there is no evidence to support this – and no compulsory KC/BVA scheme in place to suggest that there is a significant problem. The test carries high risk with a general anaesthetic and is not in the best interest of the dog and is therefore a welfare issue. If the KC considers that a surgical procedure for AI is a welfare debt to the dog, this surely must fall into the same category.

We would also argue that the test itself doesn't actually tell us anything that can confirm if the dog tested will or won't produce the condition in its offspring, which is surely the reason for the test? Does having a 'clear' dog mean that it won't produce cases? We are sure that in the case of joint development problems of any kind in the Giant breeds, but

especially the tall, long-boned and fast growing breeds, you would be hard pushed to find any orthopaedic consultant who would say unequivocally that there is an inherited/genetic cause to the condition. We believe most would say that there might be a familial tendency, but other factors can influence whether or not it actually occurs – diet, exercise and environment can play a big part in what happens to the joints of a giant puppy.

To warrant such a test with such a high risk to an otherwise apparently healthy dog, we would need proof that it would actually produce a meaningful result. At the moment that does not appear to be the case.

3. Livershunt – Current Status – Breed Club Recommendation

Our Proposal: Leave it as it is

This is another success story, where the incidence of the condition in the breed is very low, because people have co-operated on a voluntary basis and tested puppies over a long period of time. However, again, all the test can do is identify an affected puppy, it cannot identify whether or not a dog or bitch might produce it. As yet the mode of inheritance is not clearly established and all we know is that breeding stock are not affected, as either they have been tested or an affected would have shown signs of this as a puppy. Initially we had thought that we would like this as an ABS Requirement, but if the Breed's own Code of Conduct and membership criteria can be met within the ABS scheme, we are happy to leave it as a breed Club Recommendation.

4. Heart Testing – Current Status – Not on there

Our Proposal: Add as a Breed Club Recommendation – Annual Screening of Breeding Stock as set out in the breed's own scheme

We would like to include this as a Breed Club Recommendation, PROVIDED that it follows the criteria set out in the breed's own scheme. It currently appears on our own Code of Conduct as a strong recommendation that all breeding stock should be annually heart tested. It is not a one-off exercise as the condition can develop at any stage of the dog's life. However, full heart screening before breeding allows you to know that you have taken all precautions available to ensure that you are not unwittingly breeding with affected stock. We know that with DCM, in most cases, it is inherited.

Also heart testing is often not a black and white scenario, there are sometimes 'equivocals' that are measured in ways specific to the breed. Our existing scheme accommodates this.

Finally, we think it important that the public are made aware that even with all the testing in the world, we are dealing with live animals and there are no guarantees. Just because

the tests are taken does not guarantee that a dog might not fall ill at some stage. All it indicates is that the dog has been tested and that the breeder has done everything he/she can do to try to ensure the best possible outcome for a litter/puppy.

We believe that the ABS could be in danger of suggesting that by following good breeding practices and taking all the health checks specified that nothing will ever go wrong. We need to remember that Nature has an uncanny way of being unpredictable and we don't have all the answers. We are also concerned that any proposed Media campaign will reinforce this and also suggest that anybody that isn't a member of the ABS is of doubtful provenance, which clearly isn't the case.

We look forward to receiving your feedback,

Yours Sincerely,

Tim Finney

Secretary IWHG, for and on behalf of the IWHG, The IW Club, The IW Society and the IWCNI

CC attendees at meeting, Nov 23, 2008:

Irish Wolfhound Health Group:

Chairman: Mr P V Pask (Chairman IW Club)

Treasurer: Ms R Peek (IW Society)

Secretary: Mr T N Finney (Chairman IW Club of NI)

Mrs M Brace (IW Society)

Dr C Taylorson (IW Club)

Mrs J Taylorson (IW Club)

Ms J Timmins (IW Society)

Additional - officers/members of breed clubs:

Mr K Pursglove (Breed Council Liason Officer, Vice President, IW Club)

Ms S Surrell (President, IW Society)

Mrs E Murray (Chairman, IW Society)

Mr K Harmer (Secretary, IW Society)

Mr D Malley (Secretary, IW Club)

Mrs P Pask (Treasurer, IW Club)

Mrs J Pain. (IW Club)

Mrs D Redfern (IW Society)