

Norwich Terriers, 11-14

Title: Re-thinking the health guarantee: Do puppy buyers understand health screening tests?

Lately I've noticed that prospective puppy buyers, more often than not, ask about a health guarantee. Perhaps this trend – if a trend at all – is motivated by well-meaning websites with advice such as this one: “Reputable breeders provide clauses that guarantee the puppy to be free from breed specific defects.” Hmmmm, sounds good. And, yes, I provide a health guarantee – a rather generous one at that, covering all congenital health defects for two years. Buyer gets a full refund or replacement puppy, AND gets to keep the original sick (defective) puppy because it would be cruel to take a beloved pet away. I can't recall my reasoning for this “extended warranty”, but I'm re-thinking it now. How can I possibly guarantee that a puppy will not have a congenital or hereditary defect? Answer: I can't, and puppy buyers need to know this.

What about health screening tests? The Norwich Terrier Club of America recommends health screening “to determine the genetic soundness of the dog or the bitch prior to breeding”. I fully endorse health testing. It provides some information to guide breeding choices. For some diseases, tests based on identification of a specific genetic mutation are available, and tests that identify a dog's genotype are powerful tools for breeders to use to eliminate genetic disease. In Norwich Terriers we can identify genetic markers for one disease: primary lens luxation (PLL), but so far the condition appears very rare in the breed. Our parent club recommends that Norwich breeders screen for hip dysplasia, patellar luxation, and congenital eye disease as part of the CHIC (Canine Health Information Center) program. But, breeding by the results of these tests does not guarantee the health of the progeny produced because the traits that any dog or bitch will actually pass on to its offspring are largely conjecture. Puppy buyers who do not understand the limitations of health testing may have a false perception that breeders can control the genetic makeup of the puppies we produce.

Our puppy buyers should have a realistic understanding of what a breeder can and cannot do. Each puppy is a random and unique compilation of planning and chance. We simply do not have the tools to create a perfect gene pool, and it does not serve a puppy buyer when the breeder “guarantees” the pup against defects over which the breeder has little or no control. For some conditions, such as hip dysplasia, it is known that the condition is not wholly controlled by genes and that environmental factors, such as diet and exercise, may contribute. Seizures in dogs are another example: generally attributed to idiopathic (unknown cause) epilepsy, the assumption has been that there is a heritable cause, but a recent study in border collies suggests that genes contribute only modest risk.

So, what is reasonable in terms of a health guarantee? It is reasonable for breeders to have puppies examined by a veterinarian, to provide the new owner with their puppy's complete health record, and to ensure that all parties know that the puppy was healthy at the time of transfer (to the extent possible by the health exam). It is also reasonable to stipulate that new owners have the puppy examined by their own veterinarian within several days and, if a health issue is found, to refund the purchase price or provide an acceptable replacement puppy. I don't think we should make claims and guarantees that we cannot support through conscientious planned breeding decisions. We should use available tests to screen our breeding stock and report the results to both an open registry and to our puppy buyers. Puppy buyers need to understand the complexity of breeding dogs and assume some of the risks, based on all of the possible information available about the breed and the specific breeding.

While I cannot guarantee perfect puppies, every litter that I breed is with the intent of producing puppies that exceed the breed average (in terms of health, temperament, structure and type) and with the intent of keeping a puppy to improve upon what I have already. That philosophy, backed by practice, is the best reassurance that I can offer.

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