

# Omerta: The Breeders' Code of Silence

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## Mafia and Breeders

What do most modern-day breeders and the Mafia have in common?

What a strange question, you may say. It is, sadly though, a very real commonality.

The answer is simply what Padgett, a well-known geneticist refers to as the "Code of Silence" for breeders and perhaps more commonly discussed as "omerta" for the Costa Nostra. Both are deadly silences.

It's easy to understand the reasons for the conspiracy of silence when it refers to criminals, but what reasons can a breeder possibly have for maintaining "omerta"?

The reason most often given for not sharing genetic information is the fear of being made the object of a "witch hunt." It lies much deeper though.

It begins with ownership and the human need to see what one owns as being the best. Remember the "keeping up with the Jones" mentality?

Everyone wants the very best and the accolade of owning the best.

Admitting that what one owns or has bred may have faults is difficult for most people. Also at fault is the huge financial and emotional investment that breeders have in their dogs. Discovering that there may be defects in the sires and dams that breeders have so much of themselves invested in becomes frightening and causes many to refuse to even contemplate that their dogs may possess defective genes. Egos and fear of being labelled "poor breeders" are ultimately the reasons for breeders maintaining this detrimental code of silence.

## Defective Genes

Even more dangerous than the Code of Silence though is the refusal to contemplate defective genes may exist within a breeding program and be present for generations, quietly meshing through many bloodlines before manifesting itself. Could it be possible that dogs which appear healthy can actually be spreading dangerous, sometimes lethal genes throughout the breed community until finally two healthy, but gene-defective carriers combine to produce that first tell-tale affected offspring?

Of course it is and time and again the geneticists tell us how this is possible.

Simplistically, breeders cannot see defective genes and what they don't see must not exist. Therefore using that logic, all the untested dogs must be as beautifully healthy inside as they are structurally beautiful outside.

If only that logic were true! Unfortunately, far more emphasis is placed upon structural and superficial beauty simply because it is something that is easily seen, acknowledged and obtained. It's also something without any "unnecessary" financial investments. One doesn't need to pay for x-rays or blood tests or specialists' knowledge in order to evaluate how a dog conforms to a physical standard.

The real danger, though, comes not from those dogs who are tested, but from those breeders who keep their heads in the sand and refuse to believe that their dogs could be less than 'perfect'. We can begin to fix that which we reveal, but that which remains hidden is a threat to the future. But here Omerta, that "Code of Silence" is very evident. Not only do these breeders hold fast to the belief that their dogs are untainted by defective genes, structural defects or temperament problems, but they also believe that no dog that they choose to bring into their breeding program through mating with their dogs could possibly be carriers either. After all, they only "breed to the best," and of course, that best just has to be perfect.

## Show Ring Success

Now the truly criminal act occurs. These breeders are quite often very successful in the show ring; their dogs are thought to be the best - after all, they have ribbons and placings and titles to prove how worthy their dogs are! Because of their show ring success, they are seen as breed authorities, people that newcomers to the breed trust for knowledge and information. And the information these newcomers get is that there are no genetic problems to be concerned with, no need to do that "expensive testing when the dogs are all healthy." Even more disastrous to the breed's future is that these breeders' attitudes begin to prevail. The newcomers see the success of these breeders' dogs and buy them (even though few, if any, have had even the most rudimentary testing for structural faults, poor health or defective genes). The newcomers then have a

financial and emotional investment to protect which begins to spread this attitude, with predictable results. Soon, because these breeders are the "powers" within the breed (quite often judges, people selected to discuss the breed at seminars, breeders who command respective prices for puppies and stud fees, breeders seen winning), they use this "power" to ensure that it becomes unethical to discuss any defects, in either health or temperament, found in any of the pedigrees of their sires, dams or progeny of their sires or dams. All too often one hears "I don't dare say anything if I want to win" or "there are three lines with epilepsy (or heart or eye or pick a health problem), but you don't need to know about them." Of course we need to know about them, how else are we to make intelligent decisions about which dogs would best benefit the future we plan for our dogs unless we consider not only the structural beauty, but also the hidden genetics that we are attempting to also improve?

What about the breeders who openly discuss the defects found in their own dogs? Unfortunately, they are all too often labelled as "poor breeders" and their dogs said to be "defective". They are shunned and spoken of in whispers and sneers. The very fact that these breeders are striving to share knowledge openly and to scientifically test their dogs make these breeders the subject of witch hunts by the very people who are either too cheap, too unconcerned, too egotistical, too uncaring about the future to even test their dogs, much less have the courage to honestly discuss their dogs. Instead of applauding these breeders who choose to share information, these breeders become shunned and hounded. As a result, and because human nature makes us want to be part of a group instead of outside the group, breeders begin to do what they do best - they maintain silence and lie or refuse to admit what they do know.

## **"Poor Breeders"**

As more and more newcomers join a breed and inexperienced breeders and exhibitors all jump on the bandwagon of showing, owning and practicing the art of breeding, they turn to the breeders who are winning, equating winning with superior quality dogs. The breeders are, therefore, more determined to have nothing bad revealed about any of their dogs, further establishing in their minds the perfection of the dogs they breed and further increasing the financial and emotional investment that they have in perpetuating this theory. Winning in the show ring has nothing to do with genetic health.

Indeed, a number of the winning dogs are carriers of genetic disorders at the least and, in some instances, are known to have genetic health disorders. While a genetic disorder itself, depending upon type and severity, should never preclude the dog from the genetic pool, it is absolutely mandatory that people be aware of any area of concern in order to breed intelligently. At the very least, the dogs that the dog is bred to must be tested and their backgrounds looked at carefully to limit the possibility of affecting more dogs or making more dogs carriers of the disorder. Yet, because the winners don't want to be labelled as "poor breeders" and lose the accolade of being the best (as well as the possible financial loss in not being able to sell puppies or stud fees at as high a price), the "Code of Silence" becomes even more firmly embraced.

The newcomers, because they want to be accepted, avoid talking about the sires and dams that produce poorly, whether it is structure, health or temperament problems. Also, they too now have a financial and emotional investment in addition to wanting to be accepted into the "winners club."

They may even recognize trends in one or more lines in their own pedigrees, but refuse to acknowledge these trends and keep them secret for fear of being labelled.

Often, the breeders, while not openly acknowledging that there are any problems, will attempt to dilute the possibility of the disorder rearing its head by out-breeding to another totally different line.

Dr. Jerold Bell, a well-known geneticist, has this to say about this method: "Repeated out-breeding to attempt to dilute detrimental recessive genes is not a desirable method of genetic disease control.

Recessive genes cannot be diluted; they are either present or not. Out-breeding carriers multiples and further spreads the defective gene (s) in the gene pool. If a dog is a known carrier or has high carrier risk through pedigree analysis, it can be retired from breeding, and replaced with one or two quality offspring. Those offspring should be bred, and replaced with quality offspring of their own, with the hope of losing the defective gene."

## **Fear**

Unfortunately, refusing to acknowledge or test for genetic disorders doesn't make them go away. What we can't see still has a huge impact on the breed and continuing to breed these carriers of defective genes allows the defect to take a firmer hold in the breed. Those breeders who try very hard to breed healthy dogs and take every scientific precaution to ensure genetic health are shunned for the very passion that should be applauded; the efforts they take are trivialized at best and more often ridiculed as "unnecessary" or "fear-

mongering." As a result, these breeders work alone and, outside of their own kennel, their efforts make little impact on the breed as a whole.

Omerta can only be broken by people who have the courage, conviction and passion to ensure that the breed as a whole becomes stronger and healthier.

Instead of witch hunts for those who have the heartache of dealing with the problems, the goal of applauding those with the courage and determination to speak out openly should be taken up by every breed club in every country.

Awards in addition to those given to breeders who have the most winning dogs should be given to those breeders who work tirelessly to improve the breed.

Prettiiness and beauty doesn't improve a breed; genetic health and the ability to live a pain-free, healthy life far surpass beauty, but are more difficult to obtain.

## **The Cost**

The cost of genetic testing is not high when one looks at the effects that refusing to test may have on the breed. Ask any knowledgeable breeder whose breed has rampant heart, blood disorder, eye or hip problems whether they blame the lack of foresight and the refusal of past breeders in making a further financial investment in the breed for the almost insurmountable problems now and the answer is predictable. In the UK, it is possible to do testing by certified specialists for hip, elbow, eye, heart, blood, immune disorders for around a total investment of £295.00 (far less in the United States), less than a cost of a puppy or a stud fee. It's possible to do far less testing, but at what cost? Will the breed suffer from heart problems in the future because a simple £7.50 stethoscope test (done through one of the breed-sponsored heart clinics, in this case the Boxer) was not important at the time? Will the breed be faced with trying to eradicate blindness years from now because a £16.00 eye exam (done through one of the many eye clinics held each month or free if done at Crufts dog show at the clinic they hold each year) was thought unwarranted? Will the descendants be filled with pain from bad hips and/or elbows because the breed moved well in the show ring and didn't look dysplastic to the naked eye? (X-rays necessary for hip and elbow evaluations are the most expensive testing at a cost of approximately £110 for hips and an additional £80 for elbows when done with the hips; unfortunately it takes six different films to evaluate elbows and the cost reflects the number of films necessary.) Testing for things such as von Willebrand's Disease (vWD) and thyroid testing (immune system) can be done inexpensively as blood tests at perhaps £30 and £50 each. Granted, testing for these genetic disorders won't guarantee that a problem won't occur in future breedings, but testing will greatly reduce the chances of problems and that is a good place to start. If a breeder cannot provide proof in the form of veterinarian-issued certificates or reports that genetic testing has been done, the buyer should be aware that they purchase at their own risk! Caveat emptor! Breeders may claim that their dogs have never limped or that there is no need to do any testing because the breed is healthy. Some may even claim that their veterinarians have said that genetic testing was unnecessary. Those stances are irresponsible. Once again, genes are not visible and carriers of defective genes may themselves appear healthy to the naked eye. It is only with testing that we really know whether our dogs are affected or not and only then with honest evaluation of pedigrees having tested or affected dogs that the potentiality for carriers are realized.

## **Break The Silence**

What can we do to break the deadly Code of Silence? The majority, if not all, breed clubs have a code of ethics that require members to breed healthy dogs. One of the places to start is with the clubs. Instead of being social institutions or "good ole boy" clubs, these breed organizations could begin upholding the very real goal of protecting the future of the breed by demanding and requiring that genetic testing be undertaken prior to breeding. Far more serious than breeding a sixteen-month old bitch is the practice of breeding without taking every possible safeguard that genetic health is a priority. Yet, in many clubs "poor breeders" are identified by the age at which they breed or the frequency in which they breed rather than the very real criteria that proof of health be mandatory.

Take the emphasis off winning - how many clubs determine "breeder of the year" based on the number of progeny that wins? Are there clubs that actually require that the breeder also must show proof that they are doing all they can do to ensure the future of the breed?

We can break the silence by commending those with the courage and determination to talk about problems, share successes and knowledge instead of ostracizing them. Omerta fails if every puppy buyer and stud dog user demands that proof of genetic testing is shown.

The "Code of Silence" fails when we realize that it is not enough to breed winning dogs or to command the highest price for puppies or to have a stud dog that is used fifty, sixty, a hundred times; we must take back the passion with which we all first embraced our breeds and passionately work with determination toward a future where the numbers of genetic disorders are reduced each year.

If those you know breed without testing, ask yourself why - is it lack of courage in perhaps finding a carrier within their breeding stock? Is it because they fear a financial loss if they test? Is it because they truly believe that their dogs couldn't possibly be less than perfect? Is it because they fear they will lose their "top breeder" standing if they admit that there are problems that need working on? Is it because they fear that it will be harder to breed beautiful and healthy dogs? Or have they lost the passion with which they first loved the breed while they were climbing the road to winning success? Or, more sadly, is it because they really just don't care about that which they cannot actually see?

## **Better Future**

It's hard work and takes great courage to develop a breeding program using scientific methods and tests, but the hope of a better future should drive us all to that very commitment. The key is being able to work together without fear of whispers or silence. Omerta, the "code of silence", can be broken if more of us decide that we are not going to tolerate the quiet any longer.

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