

Don't Shoot the Messenger

A guide for senders and receivers

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After years of hearing many sad accounts from messengers (i.e., dog owner whose dog has a serious health problem, sometimes one known to be genetic), and less frequently, having heard from thoughtful breeders not in denial, I wanted to share CA's perspective on the subject. I hope this can be reassuring to those who have been the messengers and the receptive receivers, and that it can inspire others to think about their responses in such situations. The article is reprinted in part, and with permission. E. Sell

It isn't easy to learn that your dog or bitch has produced an inherited disease, particularly one that is serious. We invest not just money, but a great deal of ourselves in our dogs. If something goes wrong, it feels like someone slammed a fist into your gut. All your hopes and plans for that dog and its relatives are suddenly in question. It's normal that your first reaction might be, "This can't be true!" But you need to get beyond the denial as quickly as possible so you can deal rationally and effectively with what you have learned.

It is no less difficult to be the messenger. Most of us have either been "shot" for delivering bad news or known those who were. At best it's unpleasant. Sometimes when the reaction is very bad, it can be painful or frightening. Even so, we must be as willing to share unpleasant news as we are the good things. Both are important to other breeders' efforts.

A Tale of Three Breeders. Let's consider a fictional, but not atypical scenario. Sara, Kara, and Tara are breeders. Kara bred her bitch to Sara's stud dog and had a lovely litter. She sold a puppy to Tara. Two and a half years later, Tara contacted Sara and Kara to let them know the puppy had developed a serious potentially fatal, inherited disease.

Sara was shocked, but supportive, offering to help Tara in any way she could. When Sara got off the phone she sat down and cried for a while, but she knew she'd have to do some serious thinking about her boy and her breeding program.

Kara got the same call shortly after Sara. She went ballistic, accusing Tara of mistreating the dog and causing the disease. She went on to lecture the now sobbing Tara about how many years she had been breeding and all the honors and titles she and her dogs had earned where Tara had only been in the breed for a few years. Kara finished her tirade, declaring there were no inherited problems in her dogs, never had been, and how dare Tara attempt to destroy thirty years of breeding. Kara hung up, leaving Tara stunned and open-mouthed as the dial tone buzzed in her ear.

Kara the Incurable. Not every breeder reacts as badly as Kara, fortunately. Some blow up, recover from their initial shock and deal with the problem in an effective manner. Some simply purge the information from their minds, denying they ever had any such thing should anyone ask. A few, like Kara, go over the top in their efforts to defend themselves against a perceived attack upon their dogs and themselves.

Most Karas out there confine themselves to bluster, depending on bully tactics to discourage further discussion. Those with camp followers may order a circling of the wagons, encouraging their minions to be socially obnoxious to the messenger, through snubs, rumor campaigns and insults. An exceptionally nasty Kara will pull out the big guns and threaten legal action.

Sometimes the Karas of the world plan ahead. After all, an ounce of prevention can save a lot of time and energy later. One breeder I'm aware of had, and may still have, a clause in her contract that forbids buyers from discussing the dog with a geneticist. It is doubtful that such a clause is legally binding, but it no doubt intimidates some into silence if anything goes wrong. One wonders why anyone would consider purchasing a dog from someone who made such a clause part of her contract.

Other Karas control through co-owns, preventing buyers from taking any step with the dog that they do not personally approve. Co-ownership is a common practice and can certainly be beneficial, but it is interesting to note that the American Kennel Club discourages the practice, stating bluntly, "Co-ownership agreements, in far too many cases, lead to problems."

The Karas of the world may also resort to a smoke screen by denying the condition is a problem at all. They may say that the dog isn't actually sick or that the sickness isn't inherited. If forced to acknowledge the hereditary nature of the disease, they will insist that it must have come from the other dog rather than their own. If presented with information supporting the sick dog's diagnosis, they repudiate the accuracy of that information, declaring diagnostic work inadequate, the vet incompetent, or the experts on the matter don't know what they are talking about.

Tara Stands Firm. It isn't easy being the messenger, as Tara discovered. You hope people will be like Sarah and accept bad news with grace, but that isn't always going to happen. So what should you do if you find yourself in Tara's shoes?

You cannot let the task overwhelm you, even if it is slow going. When you find yourself under fire it may seem there's no point in trying, but the attitude toward inherited disease is shifting. Who would have thought 20 years ago that OFA would accept open listing of dogs that did not pass or that the AKC would encourage and support something like the Canine Health Information Center (CHIC)? (*Note: CERF still does not offer open listing in 2005! E. Sell*)

So, what to do? First, realize that you are not alone. The bully tactics are designed to keep people from communicating the unwanted information. This doesn't mean you must take out a billboard announcing what went wrong, but there is no reason you cannot inform concerned individuals. So long as you are truthful you are free to discuss it with whomever you choose. In the relatively unusual circumstance that you are threatened with legal action, consult an attorney. This can make sure you stay on firm legal ground in your locale, and probably give you peace of mind, as well.

The only people you must inform about genetic diseases, ethically, are the breeder of your dog, and if you know how to contact him/her, the owner of the sire. What they do from there is beyond your control and responsibility. If someone acts like Kara, that behavior is her problem, not yours. Just say good-bye and go about your business knowing you did what was right.

Depending on your personal comfort level, you might join a topic related support group or consider open-listing your dog's condition if one of the health registries handles the disease involved. (*Note: BeaCon offers a voluntary open health registry for reporting on health problems in Bearded Collies. E Sell.*) The more accustomed we all become with readily sharing health information as we often do things (both good and bad) that pertain to conformation, temperament, or functional traits, the sooner people like Kara will set aside their anger and fear, and start dealing constructively with health issues.

Each of us bears sole responsibility for our own behavior. We must be willing to be the messenger, no matter what reaction we may receive. We must also learn to receive, and with that, to lower our weapons when someone comes to us with bad news. Otherwise, we return to the days of silence that allowed genetic diseases to spread almost unchecked.