

Pedigree Dogs

Sir,

The clear aim of the recent BBC television programme “Pedigree Dogs Exposed” was to demonstrate that unscrupulous, in particular dangerously close breeding was prevalent among dog breeders in order to develop, exaggerate and perpetuate certain features of the breed standard deemed to be desirable for reasons of cosmetics or fashion. The principal proposition of the programme seemed to be that this was being done with little if any regard for the health, athleticism or longevity of the animals concerned. Examples from various different breeds were taken with emphasis on the more popular breeds including, prominently, the Cavalier King Charles Spaniel.

I am not, myself, a dog breeder and I hold no official position in the dog world. Neither do I have any veterinarian qualification. I have been married to a keen and dedicated Cavalier King Charles Breeder for about 48 years so some of the mystique and lore has rubbed off on me. I would like to make a particular point to try to put this subject into a proper perspective.

The Cavalier was only recognized as a distinct breed in 1946 and can therefore be considered a young breed. Cavaliers only came into being because the breeders of the day were dissatisfied with the degree to which the recognized Toy Spaniel (The King Charles) had diverged (paradoxically, for largely cosmetic reasons) from the historic toy spaniel as depicted in pre-Victorian illustrations. So right from the outset the breeders’ objects were to produce a healthy animal with a long nose and properly shaped, generous skull. This was achieved by careful, selective breeding done under the auspices of the Kennel Club itself. In the BBC programme much was made of the presence of Syringomyelia (SM) in the Cavalier. In interview a prominent Veterinary Scientist was made to imply that SM is caused by pressure on the brain and that the Cavalier’s skull is, through breeding, too small for its brain. I understand that the causes of SM are very much more complex and difficult to predict. It seems to me that it was grossly and deliberately misleading to imply that the prevalence of SM is increasing and is a direct result of ruthless breeding to produce animals with smaller skulls for cosmetic reasons. This is a lie verging on the criminal. Indeed, the very occurrence of SM in Cavaliers appeared to be greatly exaggerated. My wife and I have known and loved Cavaliers for many, many years but neither of us has ever seen an afflicted animal. This is not to say that we would deny the existence of SM or that we would wish to minimize the pain, distress and anxiety that it can cause. It is, I believe essential to keep these matters in perspective. Loving and responsible breeders do much to promote the health and happiness of their breed but dog breeding is not an exact science – there are too many variables and there will always be room to seek more knowledge.

I know that there were other examples in other breeds where the programme’s producers and editors chose to distort and misrepresent the facts. Any one of these examples would serve to throw the truth and accuracy of the whole programme into serious doubt. Perhaps the most ludicrous gambit of the programme makers was their attempt to compare dog breeders to the so-called genetic engineers of the Nazi regime. I am sure that intelligent viewers will have seen this effort by the BBC for what it was – a stupid and facile attempt to discredit the very people best placed to benefit the animals they love. For sure, those who made and contributed to this programme cannot be regarded as true animal lovers.

John Barwell