

This month I fully intended to file a clever “end of the millenium” piece about how far veterinary medicine has progressed the past 100 years and where it’s going in the next century. Then it occurred to me-clever is not an adjective I would use to describe my columns, and more importantly being a veterinarian of only 15 years I could maybe speak about the past decade but the past century is out of my league. And where is animal medicine going in the next century? Like most things the sky seems to be the limit. That said, let’s address an issue a bit less grandiose than a new millenium but seemingly no less important to dog lovers in our community-dog breeding. This is a topic that has been on my list for some time. From my point of reference it’s an important issue that’s worthy of a column all its own.

I don’t think a week goes by where I don’t see at least one or two families with a new puppy. I really enjoy these visits. The excited family brings the pup in for its first visit, everyone is intensely interested in learning the newest information on how to keep their new little family member healthy and happy. I try to plan a little extra time for these visits because I know our discussion will cover a wide range of topics ranging from diet, to vaccinations, to housebreaking and more. When we reach the vitally important topic of spaying /neutering, I often sense a little hesitation on the part of the family. Sometimes the family has plans for breeding the dog when it’s mature. Reasons for this can be many and varied. Some hope to sell the puppies and make a lot of money. Others are just so happy with their new dog that they’d like to “have one of her/his pups”. And some believe that if a female dog is allowed to have a litter she’ll be a nicer dog. I can understand that these reasons may sound very compelling, but they really don’t have much merit. So at the risk of sounding a bit blunt I usually say –“Don’t do it!”

First, let’s address the medical reasons. We know that if a female dog is spayed before her first heat cycle (first heat usually starts between 8-12 months of age) she has an extremely low risk of developing breast cancer later in life. Breast cancer is a common cancer in dogs and, in some cases, can be very difficult to control. If allowed to go through one, or worse two, heat cycles her risks for this potentially lethal cancer is much greater. If that’s not enough reason to spay your female dog consider that a spayed female dog has zero risk for uterine or ovarian disease. Spayed female dogs don’t go through troublesome heats every few months like their non-spayed counterparts.

Male dogs benefit as well from neutering. Neutered males have much less problems with various prostate gland diseases, not to mention zero risk for testicular cancer. Male dogs that are neutered are less likely to display unpleasant behaviors such as inter-dog aggression and roaming the neighborhood. A dog trainer acquaintance of mine tells me that neutered male dogs are more easily trained than non-neutered dogs.

If the medical reasons are not convincing you to spay or neuter your dog consider the tragic numbers that come from Solano County’s animal shelter each year. Approximately 10,000 animals are euthanized each year in our county shelter alone. Most of these animals are perfectly healthy but simply lack a caring and loving home. Maybe these appalling statistics are what make me such an impassioned proponent of spaying and neutering for or pets. I think our animal friends deserve better.

If you have financial interests in breeding your dog, you might want to think again. People that make money at this, professional breeders, are usually quite

experienced and knowledgeable about all the ups and downs of dog breeding. This makes them choose their breeding stock very carefully, so as to minimize expensive mistakes.

If, after reading all this, you still want to breed your dog then we should talk about some “ground rules”. After all, if I can’t talk you out of breeding your dog then at least let me help you do it right. First of all, no breeding before two years of age-trust me, you don’t want puppies having puppies. Dogs that are going to be bred should be screened for various genetically based diseases that can be passed on to their offspring. These diseases include, but are not limited to, dysplasia of the hips, elbows and retinas. Dysplasia is a word that means “abnormal development”. With the help of your veterinarian these dysplastic diseases can often be recognized within the first two years of your dog’s life, and if found should disqualify him/her from any breeding. Your dog’s “family tree” should be researched for other health issues that might have a genetic basis. Not only should your dog be screened for these problems but a veterinarian should clear the dog’s mate of any problems as well. I think its good for newcomers to dog breeding to talk with an experienced breeder. These folks can provide the rookie with some valuable insights. Most importantly, develop a close working relationship with your veterinarian; she/he can be a valuable partner in your efforts to have a healthy litter.

Don’t get the wrong idea, I find a new litter of puppies just as fun and exciting as anyone does. I just can’t seem to get out of my mind the image of those 10,000 unlucky animals at our animal shelter each year. Tragically being “put to sleep” because we simply have too many of them in our community. Hopefully this column will cause some to pause and reconsider breeding their pet. Who knows, maybe a veterinarian 100 years from now will write a clever column chronicling how the pet overpopulation problem was controlled early in the 21st century by concerned pet owners making wise choices.

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