

by Sharon M. Michael

* PROGRESSIVE RETINAL ATROPHY --A PROGRESSIVE FORM OF BLINDNESS, A RECESSIVE GENE, AND INHERITED FROM TWO CARRIERS. [ON BOTH SIDES OF THE FAMILY. A.M.]

It usually starts out as "night blindness", an inability to see stationary objects. It becomes worse and worse, ending with total blindness--sometimes in just a few months, sometimes it takes as long as two or three years.

In Irish Setters, it can be diagnosed as early as eight weeks with special equipment. Poodles often don't show it until 4-6 years of age. Dachshunds have it but no age has been established for diagnosis.

I first noticed a 4-year old female showing signs of blindness--running down a dim hallway and turning into the washing machine, 2 feet before the hallway branched. It was not all the time, it seemed to come and go. Then I noticed that she seemed to keep her shoulder brushing the wall--guiding her off the wall to tell her when to turn. Imagine my horror when I noticed her 7-month old daughter occasionally doing the same thing!

I promptly took both dogs to my vet who found that the pupil dilation reflexes were slow and scheduled me for an appointment with an Eye Specialist from Cornell University who conducted clinics in Albany. The mother dog was approximately 75% blind, the daughter was barely discernable, but definitely in the early stages of PRA. He felt that since I was aware of the problem, I was more astute in recognizing the symptoms. Both dogs were happy, face-licking dogs. He asked if I planned to put them down. I said "No, just spay the mother". He was pleased and said some dogs adapt very well and he felt that these two were so outgoing that they would get along very well.

I checked out all my dogs carefully and found one male to be almost totally blind. It hit him very quickly and he was extremely apprehensive about it. He is very unsure around other dogs and very defensive. My diagnosis of PRA was confirmed when he was tested. All the rest of my dogs on the premises tested clear.

But the ticker is this: A dog can test clear and still be a carrier. I know that the sire and dams of my three PRA dogs are carriers. They have all been withdrawn from breeding and spayed or neutered. The Cornell vet felt that it was showing up early in my bloodline most likely by two years of age. (My four-year old showed one sign very early but we never suspected it and therefore it went undiagnosed for a long time. The sign she showed early was a reluctance to come inside at night--she always wanted to be carried in from her run. We just attributed it to her silliness, but now realize it was the first sign of night blindness). Age will vary from bloodline to bloodline however.

Since I have announced that PRA is in my bloodline, I have received calls from others with PRA dogs. One dog was diagnosed with PRA at the age of 10 years old. The owner brought up a very good point--How many older dogs actually have PRA and have it diagnosed simply as cataracts or just plain "old age blindness"? All dogs going blind should be tested for PRA, no matter how old they are. [It is my understanding that PRA shows no visible signs such as the cloudiness that indicates cataracts. A.M.]

All my original dogs were tested for PRA and found clear several years ago when DCA had a clinic for it. Did it come into my line when I crossed out? Did I have it all along? Where did it come from? If people will come forward and announce who is a known carrier or who has it in their bloodline, instead of sweeping it under the carpet, maybe we can get a handle on this and reduce it dramatically. I can't be the only one with carriers. Phone calls are proving this to me.

PRA (continued)....

My dogs afflicted with PRA are:

Midachs Royal Blue MS
Midachs Lushious Peach MS
Midachs Aries MS

My dogs who are carriers (their parents) are:

Midachs Francine
Ch. Midachs Christopher
Midachs Victory MS
Ch. Midachs The Heiress MS

(Chris & Heiress are brother and sister. Victor is their nephew. Francine is Chris' daughter. Obviously one of Chris' and Heiress' parents is a carrier and it goes back from there, but where?)

I am in the process of sending a form letter to everyone who has purchased a dog from me in the last 20 years, hoping to find out whether or not any of their dogs became blind, at what age, diagnosis, etc., to determine what other dogs in my kennel, if any, are carriers. I hope the response is good.

I am also in the process of drafting a letter to send to veterinary universities throughout the country to see if I can get any information on the incidence of PRA in Dachshunds.

I cannot publish or announce the names of carriers or dogs with PRA owned by others, only the owners can do so. But if anyone has a dog with PRA--please send me a pedigree. Maybe this can be traced and a pattern found. It will also help in clearing bloodlines.

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[Editor's note: Sharon is to be commended on her courage in sharing her misfortune with the rest of us in order to help eliminate something that could become a problem in the breed. It is our hope that others who discover they have the problem (with PRA) will also come forward and then people can compare notes and pedigrees and know where the problems might be. Only by being completely honest can this problem be eliminated. We will have other articles in upcoming issues of the Digest. You are welcome to send in any information you may have in order to share it with fellow members. Please do so. A.M.]

[It is my understanding that DCA will be conducting a seminar and clinic on PRA on Thursday afternoon of DCA week, May 21, 1992. This would be a good chance to learn more about PRA and to have whatever dogs you have with you tested at a minimal fee. More information will be forthcoming. A.M.]