
Sophie – An Auction Rescue Story

By Nancy Paule Melone, MBA-Ph.D.

Recently, I participated in the rescue of four Bernese Mountain Dog puppies. The puppies, all sold to us on full AKC registrations, were slated to be sold at a puppy mill dog auction in Ohio's Amish country in the following month. Of these four puppies, three will likely find "forever" homes once they are immunized, sterilized and socialized. The fourth puppy, Sophie, whom I am fostering, is an entirely different matter. Sophie, whose picture appears in this article, has severe portosystemic vascular anomaly (PSVA), otherwise known as "liver shunt," a congenital defect suspected of being genetic. Currently, she is not adoptable and most likely will live with us until she crosses the "rainbow bridge."



Liver shunt occurs when the vessel that supplies the puppy while in the womb fails to close properly. As a result, the puppy's blood bypasses the liver, which normally filters out blood toxins. This defect has many symptoms. Twelve-week old Sophie suffers from, among other things, small stature (12 lbs versus a normal weight of 30 lbs), hepatic encephalopathy (e.g., confusion and aimless wandering, particularly after a meal), and intermittent anorexia (e.g., eating causes her to become sicker, so there are periods in which she does not eat and just sleeps). By feeding a special low-protein diet and administering frequent daily medications, a very conscientious owner can often ameliorate the effects of the defect so that the puppy has an acceptable, if likely abbreviated, life. In some cases, the defect can be eliminated with one of two surgeries designed to close the vessel or vessels. The surgery ranges in cost from \$2000 to \$3700, depending on the number of vessels, their location and the surgical technique used. The mortality rate for surgery can range from 15%-66%, depending on the surgical technique.

While dog auctions are a relatively new phenomenon in Ohio, they are not new in other agricultural states. In general, these operations are located in rural areas near farmers who breed puppies as livestock or a cash crop, rather than as companion animals. These "puppy millers," euphemistically called "commercial volume breeders" by agriculture officials, exist everywhere but are concentrated largely in Missouri, Iowa, Pennsylvania, Oklahoma and Ohio. Puppy mill and dog auction operations supply other puppy millers with "breeding stock." Dog brokers attend them to buy puppies that they broker to pet stores or sell to unsuspecting buyers who respond to their newspaper ads. My caution to readers is that the dogs that produced Sophie are the same or similar to those producing the puppies one can buy in some local pet stores. That a pet store brags about obtaining its dogs from "local breeders" says very little about the puppy's genetic health or temperament. "Local" can be a puppy miller or a back-yard breeder, since a reputable breeder who certifies the breeding stock used, vaccinates, socializes, and supports the owner of her puppies throughout the life of the puppies would never knowingly sell those puppies through a pet store.

For a number of reasons, breed rescue organizations and some breed clubs work to get dogs out of this sordid supply chain. A female dog in these mills is usually bred at every heat cycle once she is a year old, resulting in an expected life span as short as three years. Puppies passing through this supply chain are rarely socialized to be proper household pets, are often poor examples of the breed (even if they are AKC registrable) and may carry serious and costly genetic diseases and defects that dramatically shorten their lives. In one case with which I am familiar, the puppies sold at auction by a miller carried distemper because the miller refused to invest between \$2.50 and \$5.00 a vaccination to properly inoculate each of his puppies. All 13 puppies died, notwithstanding over \$15,500 paid for their veterinary care. Distemper is a disease of underdeveloped nations. Few U.S. vets have even seen it. Indeed, a veterinary school called to see whether it could bring vet students to the kennel to observe the neurological ravages of distemper. It was too late.

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Few of the breed stock used by puppy millers or local back-yard breeders have necessary health clearances from the respected certification organizations such as Orthopedic Foundation for Animals (www.offa.org) or Canine Eye Registration Foundation (www.vet.purdue.edu/~yshen/cerf.html). As a result, their offspring have much higher probabilities of inheriting serious and costly (to the owner) genetic diseases or defects, among them, orthopedic, cardiac, eye, thyroid, hepatic and bleeding disorders. Furthermore, based on the analysis of pedigrees of Bernese Mountain Dogs purchased at auction since 2001, it is clear that sooner or later, dogs from reputable kennels are drawn into these puppy mill lines, primarily because the breeders who sell their puppies on limited (non-breeding) registrations fail to follow their puppies to insure that they are sterilized. It is worth knowing that the certification records of any AKC registered dog that *has been evaluated by these organizations* can be found on these web sites.

As a result of pressure by animal advocates, some states, including one or two puppy mill havens, have passed "Puppy Lemon Laws." For example, Pennsylvania passed the "Dog Purchasers Protection Act," which offers some protection to the puppy-buying public. This law was the result of many compromises and stiff opposition from commercial kennels, but the fact remains that it was passed. If you live in a state that has passed such a law and are in the process of looking for a puppy or consider yourself a responsible breeder, I urge you to familiarize yourself with these legal protections, albeit modest. If your state does not have such a law, you might work toward passage of one. Take a look at the provisions of the Pennsylvania law at www.attorneygeneral.gov/pei/dog/index.cfm. Scroll to the bottom of the page and click on "dog purchaser" for a nice summary of a puppy buyer's rights. There is a similar guide for veterinarians. Other states with varying versions of "Puppy Lemon Laws" include, but are not limited to, Arkansas, California, Connecticut, Florida, Minnesota, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, South Carolina, Virginia, and Vermont.

Many millers avoid state licensing laws by allocating ownership of dogs in their kennels to various (often under-aged) relatives.* In this way, they are not subject to inspections. The Amish "breeder" listed on the AKC paperwork from whom we purchased the four AKC registrable puppies looked no more than fifteen, if that.

In addition to reminding you to be aware of your rights as a pet purchaser, I would also urge you to tell your public officials your feelings about these issues and to put an end to the abuse inflicted on these innocent puppies and the pain suffered by the families who may buy them.

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Nancy trains and competes with her Bernese Mountain Dogs in conformation, drafting and obedience events. She serves as trustee/treasurer for The Berner-Garde Foundation, Inc. (www.bernergarde.org) and is a member of the Bernese Mountain Dog Club of America (www.bmdca.org), Three Rivers Bernese Mountain Dog Club (www.trbmdc.org), and Westmoreland County Obedience Training Club, Inc. Nancy welcomes questions and feedback from her readers and can be reached at nmelone@nauticom.net.

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* On July 14, 2004, the US Department of Agriculture, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, published in the Federal Register (Vol. 69, No. 134) new rules and regulations designed to limit this practice. Given our experience with Ohio puppy millers (which took place several weeks after that date), it remains to be seen how effectively USDA can enforce these rules.
