



# THE HEALTH OF THE BELGIAN SHEPHERD DOG

## POSITION STATEMENT RATIONALE

### Summary

In order to maintain the Belgian Shepherd Dog (BSD) as a dog fit for its original herding purpose, and to maintain its current relatively healthy status, the Belgian Shepherd Dog Club of Queensland (BSDCQ) recommends that all of the BSD varieties (Groenendael, Tervueren, Laekenois and Malinois) are assessed for hip, elbow and eye disease, full breed DNA profile, and any other tests for identified health issues in the breed as testing becomes available. The BSDCQ undertakes actions to support breeders in these endeavours, and to inform the general community about these practices.

### Introduction

Issues about inherited disorders and poor health in some pedigree dogs has increased in recent years as the full extent and prevalence of inherited disorders has become progressively understood. Breeding strategies incorporating screening schemes and DNA testing have been shown to be successful in significantly reducing the prevalence of an inherited disorder and improving the overall health of certain breeds (Farrell et al, 2015).

Breeders are now able to examine and test their dogs for known inherited diseases before the dogs are bred from; this allows breeders to determine the chance that a dog may pass a disease-causing gene on to its offspring, giving them the information required to avoid producing affected puppies. It also allows breeders to adapt their breeding programmes and reduce the risk of the diseases appearing in future generations. Although such testing will not exclude all possible inherited and acquired diseases, it is currently the best available option to increase the chances of producing a healthy dog.

The Australian National Kennel Council (ANKC) and its affiliate bodies, which includes Dogs Queensland (DQ), believes that breeding programs should be undertaken responsibly in order to improve the overall health and wellbeing of the breed. The ANKC is currently developing strategies to assist breeders in this endeavour “the ANKC is in the process of trying to develop a nation-wide data base for the logging of all inherited disease test results...there will be both open and closed registers with the end goal of having disease data results printed on pedigrees for easy access to all buyers and potential breeders – again a long term goal” (ANKC, 2010).

DQ now requires all pedigree dogs to undertake DNA parentage testing, which also affords breeders an opportunity to screen for breed specific diseases and traits. For example, the Orivet laboratory currently can test the BSD varieties for degenerative myelopathy, ivermectin sensitivity MDRI, Mucopolysaccharidosis VII - Type II (Belgian Shepherd Type) and Spongy Degeneration with Cerebellar Ataxia.

Overseas, the UK Kennel Club operates an Assured Breeders Scheme to promote good breeding practice to produce healthy puppies. Breeders must adhere to mandatory screening requirements in the choice of sires and dams, and the scheme includes strongly recommended screening for most breeds. Adhering to a mandatory screening protocol means a breeder must comply with any relevant breed-specific DNA disease tests and follow available eye, elbow and hip dysplasia schemes and veterinary diagnostic tests to ensure that a potential sire or dam is not a carrier for a known hereditary disease (UKKC, 2018).

In the United States of America, the American Kennel Club, and other participating parent clubs, have partnered with the Orthopaedic Centre for Animals to create the Canine Health Information Centre (CHIC) to research and maintain information on the health issues prevalent in specific breeds. This includes a recommended protocol for breed-specific health screenings, and dogs tested in accordance with that protocol are recognised with a CHIC number and certification (AKC, N/D).

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Although the Belgian Shepherd Dog remains a relatively healthy breed and is not particularly prone to any major health concerns (Honkanen, 2018), the above schemes have identified relevant health (disease) tests for breeding dogs across the four varieties of BSD. These range from the minimum requirement of hip, elbow and ophthalmologist examinations (UKKC, 2018) through to undertaking hip, elbow, and ophthalmologist examinations along with autoimmune thyroiditis, cardiac and dentition examination (AKC, N/D).

### **Position**

The Belgian Shepherd Dog Club of Queensland (BSDCQ) recognises that whilst DNA and current screening schemes will assist in keeping the Belgian Shepherd Dog healthy and will reduce the number of inherited disorders in the breed, sound breeding practice also involves genomic selection, and careful study and utilisation of pedigree information in order to maintain genetic diversity within the breed.

The BSDCQ recommends that all BSD are tested according to the current minimum standards of overseas Canine Clubs, that is undertaking hip, elbow and eye examinations. The BSDCQ also recommends utilising full breed DNA profiles, and any other tests for identified health issues in the breed as testing becomes available.

The BSDCQ will undertake the actions outlined within the BSDCQ Health Strategy, the BSDCQ Health Strategy Policy and Procedure, and any required BSD Health Plans. These actions will support breeders in their health related endeavours, and inform the general community about such practices, in particular, anyone looking to purchase a Belgian Shepherd to join their family.

### **References**

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