

Epilepsy and the Great Swiss Mountain Dog

By Sue Brailey

There is much talk in the Swiss world of epilepsy. Idiopathic, which means there is no known cause, epilepsy (*IE*), affects all breeds of dogs including mongrels. No one knows what causes it but there is thought to be a genetic influence, as some lines seem to produce it more often than others. There is no test available to ascertain who carries the disease and the only way you find out is when you produce a puppy with *IE*. It is also not known if both parents have to be **carriers** or just one.

- **Carrier.....**A carrier means the dog/bitch has produced *IE* in one of their offspring but is not affected themselves.

The GSMD does not have any higher rate of *IE* than any other breed of dog. Most dogs suffering with *IE* can have their seizures controlled with medication. However in the GSMD due to its size, particularly with early onset epilepsy, the drugs are sometimes unable to fully control the seizures. The dog may still continue to have seizures which impacts hugely on the family's day to day life and their enjoyment of their beloved pet. This coupled with the high cost of medication puts a massive strain on the whole family and let us not forget what it does to the dog involved. Every time a dog seizes it makes way for another seizure and it is normally not long before the dog has cluster seizures and the vets are unable to save them. Late onset *IE* (over 5 years) often has a better outcome with regular medication and many dogs can enjoy a very full and happy life with sometimes only a few seizures or occasionally none at all.

Years ago many GSMD breeders kept quiet about *IE* in their lines. This meant other breeders unknowingly carried on breeding from lines with an **affected** parent or sibling.

- **Affected.....**This means a dog or bitch is suffering from *IE*

Those that were brave enough to openly declare they had *IE* within their breed lines were often and still are, the victims of witch hunts. This also meant other not so brave breeders kept quiet, thus escalating the problem. This does the breed no good at all as breeders need to be open and honest to try to control this terrible disease.

So far Springhaze has one mating which has **produced** *IE*.

- **Produced.....** I wish to make it clear that producing *IE* means a puppy from a particular bitch and sire has gone on to develop *IE*. **It does not mean that the bitch or the sire has *IE***

This litter, out of Dottie, was researched before mating and the stud dog was on the German breed clubs list of approved sires. We already knew Dottie's *IE* history as her breeder had been honest with us. Two of her Grandparents had previously produced epilepsy, so we were careful when choosing potential sires. We were told to find sires that had not produced epilepsy within the last 3 generations, which is what we did. Our knowledge is only as good as we are told and very sadly on this occasion the litter produced epilepsy. The owners of the rest of the litter were notified and the whole litter removed from the breeding programme. We were fortunate in respect that the *IE*

appeared early in this litter which meant none of the litter mates had already been bred from which is often the case. Experts recommend that any seizing dog should never be bred and also any litter mates of a seizing dog never be bred from. Some breeders do still breed from siblings of seizing dogs as the theory is if that particular dog/bitch is not affected there is a good chance it is clear, but we decided not to take this risk especially as *IE* can surface at any time during a dog's life and sometimes at 5 years or later, often when a dog or bitch has already been bred. Dottie had a litter before this litter with a different sire and another after this litter also with a different sire (before the *IE* surfaced in her second litter) and neither of those two litters have so far been affected or any of their offspring*. Dottie is now 9 years old and very happy and healthy.

When I found out about the *IE* I immediately informed Dottie's breeder. The next priority was to inform the German Breed club and the stud dog's owner. I then informed the owners of the rest of the litter. These are the people who needed to know. After that I have always informed the owners of potential stud dogs when enquiring about using their stud dog, **I never covered it up**. Please can I ask any owner of a dog believed to be suffering from Idiopathic Epilepsy to do the same. Also please inform me as the GSMD breed club's Breed Health Co-ordinator, especially if the dog is residing in the UK or has UK parents so I can update my records. *This information is vital to aid in the prevention of this disease*. Careful breeding could significantly reduce the incidence of *IE* within the breed. Although no one is looking to produce *IE* there is no shame in producing it as it can and does happen to any breeder. Quite often *IE* will skip a few generations and then show up again quite unexpectedly.

IE can surface at any time during a dog's life so you can only say a dog is clear after it is dead. I recently heard of a stud dog that was considered a very safe epilepsy bet, as he had no recent *IE* history in his breeding going back three generations, who has now recently produced *IE*. Any breeder who thinks they have no *IE* within their lines does not know their lines. **It is in every single pedigree**. Because I am open and honest about producing epilepsy other breeders are open and honest with me. This means from now on I can make even better informed choices when choosing breeding partners. I know I will produce it again one day as it is inevitable and the longer you breed and the more puppies you produce sooner or later, until there is a test available, epilepsy will rear its ugly head.

Springhaze holds a database of all the UK GSMD's and any health conditions that **have been declared**. So far Springhaze, in 12 litters, with 11 different sires has only produced 1 litter affected with *IE*. In accordance with good breeding practise we always try to use different stud dogs and rarely do repeat matings. This not only improves the gene pool but also means more and more dogs can be deemed safer (as none can be deemed safe). *It also means if IE does show up in a litter it is only that litter that needs to be withdrawn from the gene pool*.

Conclusion: There are many health concerns within the GSMD and Idiopathic Epilepsy is only one of them. Idiopathic Epilepsy is not exclusive to GSMD's but is present in every breed of dog including crossbreeds. It is thought as many as 6% of all dogs suffer from *IE*. Any new potential owner is advised to ask a breeder where the *IE* history is within their breed lines.

Steve and I attended an Epilepsy seminar in April 2015 with Professor Hannes Lohi, Phd who is a Professor of Molecular Genetics at the University of Helsinki in Finland. To read a synopsis of the seminar [click here...](#)

*Correct as of November 2015