

Never Forgotten

By Margaret Wilkinson

Megan (Belgrans Follow Your Dream) was a white, longcoated German Shepherd Dog, whose sire was Bricketwood Spirit of Rajah at Debylyn and dam was Belgran Bombshell. Until the age of 2 years, 8 months she was a healthy, happy and energetic dog, full of life and character. She enjoyed nothing better than running in the fields with her two older companions Phoebe and Indy, also GSDs.

It was then that she started to display what we now know as focal seizures. Four weeks later came our first encounter with a Grandmal, the full blown-no- holds-barred-seizure. My husband, John, had to hold Megan down as her seizure was so violent. This beautiful, strong shepherd's face became totally distorted, her body started to corkscrew, with the saliva turning to foam and pouring out of her mouth. With her legs paddling ferociously, it seemed to last for ages, but it was actually about seven minutes. Afterwards she urinated and defecated, was blind and very agitated.

This post ictal period lasted at that time about 4 hours, but after some future seizures, she would take as much as 2 days to recover. We called the vet, who, after seeing Megan and listening to what we described, suspected Epilepsy he then started many tests and blood work etc. He put her on a high (loading) dose of her first medication, Epiphen (Phenobarbital). It was to become the start of

many visits to the Vet, with more medication added. Genetrix (KBr) and later, when we discovered that Megan was one of the dogs that did not respond well to the medication, Keppra was added. Liquid valium was to be inserted into her rectum if the seizures went past four minutes, which happened often,

This became the start of Megan's incredible journey. Incredible in the way that she taught us the meaning of the word "compassion". The intelligence and resolve shown by Megan and also our other two German Shepherds, who, many times alerted us to an oncoming seizure by barking and standing at Megan's side while she slept. Only for Megan to awake and go into a seizure, this we witnessed many times, proving to us that they are not dumb animals and should not be treated as such. They are members of our family and they give us unconditional love and loyalty, Do they deserve anything less in return?

Many dogs that suffer from Epilepsy can, and do, live very full lives, with medication being very effective in lessening the number of seizures. The lucky ones never having any further problems, but then there are the ones like our Megan, the ones that do not respond to the medication. They cannot be stabilized and they also suffer from side effects from the medication itself. This can take many forms, one being ataxia (rear end weakness) to the point that Megan had to be carried, with us supporting her hindquarters as she behaved in a drunk and disorientated way, this became the norm most of the time. When we tried to alter the medication, in order to alleviate the Ataxia she would have a seizure. She also started having immune system related problems. One of these was Symmetrical Lupoid Omychodystrophy, where her immune system rejected her nails, causing her nails to part from the nail bed, which is a horrible and very painful condition. Imagine your own nails being pulled off, or walking with your toenails bleeding and half hanging off, we had to pull them off, just to give her some form of relief.

At no time did she bite, or growl, instead she

A million times we've needed you,
a million times we've cried,
if love alone could have saved you,
you never would have died.

Megan and Indy Wilkinson
February 2011

would lick my hand or face knowing we were trying to help. She was on her 3rd full set when we lost her. She was also heavily shaved for scans and tests, etc, but her coat never grew back. She would at times look very odd, we would sit and be looking at the state of our girl with tears in our eyes, and we are convinced we could see a cheeky grin, and that familiar wag, almost telling us that she was still hanging in there, She had lesions on her body and our vet suspected Cushing's disease, but as we were constantly monitoring Megan for any health changes, the tests came back inconclusive. We were too early for the tests to show a positive result, we learned post mortem that she did in fact have Cushing's disease.

We also had it said to us that "well I could not put my dog through that suffering". I would agree with that statement, BUT every time we would experiment and drop the medication by one tablet, say, we would see the old Megan back. When she even began to walk better, it gave both us and our vet hope that we would one day hit the medication just right and Megan would have a better quality of life. She was not giving up, so neither would we. We spoke to Sheila Rankin about Megan and we were advised to get her pedigree checked. This we did and contacted Chris Hazell (Breed Health Coordinator) and D.Cullum. We also sent Megan's pedigree to the late Dr. Malcolm Willis (Genetics Expert) who was so patient and understanding with us, explaining in great detail over a period of weeks about lines within German Shepherd Dogs and about Epilepsy. His recommendation on Megan's lines were "these lines have a problem and should be cut". Megan being the proof required to show that both the sire and dam carry epilepsy in their lines.

Chris Hazell researched Megan's pedigree and gave us the results. Megan had 54 lines going back to Hendrawen's Quadrille of Eveley, a dog used in the 1960's, who suffered from seizures. Now, having X number of lines back to a problem dog, is not necessarily a problem in itself, but it does mean that more care is required in choosing a mate. If, like Megan, you know of a producer or fitter in the pedigree of your dog, that makes a big difference with breeding and it would be advisable to get advice from a pedigree researcher on how to go forward, as the chances of producing the problem will be higher.

We contacted the Kennel Club, but they would not do anything on our say-so. We then began a year long process, during which we were asked to get a written letter of diagnosis from our Vet, Nick Bommer, who duly supplied one. After various criteria had been met, the Kennel Club sent a letter to both of the Breeders of Megan's parents, informing them of the Epilepsy produced in their lines along with their recommendations. The Kennel Club will be in a better position to do more when an official test for Epilepsy is in place and a breeder knowingly uses affected lines. Until then any puppy buyer that receives a pup from these and other lines that have a known health issue, can take the breeder to court on the grounds that the pup is not "fit for purpose". The responsibility is on the BREEDER to ensure that the lines they use are, to the best of their knowledge, free from

of health issues and, when a problem arises, to acknowledge the fact and deal with it, giving full support to the owner of the dog. There are various tests for inherited diseases and all breeders should (indeed MUST!) use them before mating their dogs.

Most importantly, breeders should make the necessary adjustments to their breeding programme to make sure that the health issue is not passed on or repeated. This may mean a financial loss for the breeder, but the financial and emotional loss to the pet owner can be a lot more. In our case, this amounted to many thousands of pounds in treatment for Megan and we would rather have paid more for Megan, knowing that she was clear of any known issues, than watch the unnecessary suffering she and our family went through.

Then came the time where she deteriorated rapidly and had three grand mal seizures in the space of one week. These did damage, from which she never recovered. She was our Megan and she never gave up until she knew that her tired body could not go on. I looked into her eyes on the table in the vets and we both knew, she and I, that it was her time. We were able to say goodbye, something for which we will always be grateful.

She passed away peacefully that night, in Feb 2011, just went to sleep,

Our Girl gone.....Why?..... due to bad breeding practices.....

Megan's journey has taken us on a road of discovery. A road of learning and gaining knowledge about this most horrible condition! We have learned that the only predictable thing about Epilepsy is that IT IS SO UNPREDICTABLE.

We have also had to learn to fight for what is right and sometimes the outcome is not always what you hope for, but fight we must, not just for our Megan, for her suffering and untimely death, but for the future of the breed. We must be the generation that makes the necessary changes in our breeding practices in order for future dogs to be given the best start in life. The responsibility for that lies with all of us. In 10 years time, what state will the breed be in, if we do nothing?

Check pedigrees with a qualified researcher and remember they need information as well. They need to be informed, confidentially if required, about PROVEN health issues in lines. How can anyone know what problems a line might contain, if the information is not shared? This silence does more damage in the long run, as eventually the truth will come out. Why are Breeders still getting away with using suspect lines? Because they CAN.

Do not leave it to someone else.....WE are the voice of our dogs - please use it! This is for all the dogs with Epilepsy and other major health issues, past and present.

Special Thanks to Vet Nick Bommer (Royal Dick Vet College Bush Roslin)

MEGAN You Are Not Forgotten

By John & Margaret Wilkinson & Family

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