

# Anyone notice trouble's brewing in doggie land?

Veterinarian Al Plechner is the kind of guy most people would take to immediately. Tall, blond and personable, he actually *looks* like the kind of man who spends his spare time running a Calabasas vineyard to raise money to support his own wildlife refuge.

Plechner is what you might call a kids and animals guy.

He has a couple of kids of his own. And, after 19 years in practice, he still seems to enjoy the four-legged patients he treats at the California Animal Hospital in West Los Angeles.

And he only seems to mind a little the entry of the very bad-tempered hybrids with a deep-seated desire to bite the hand that heals them.

Speaking of hands, the UC Davis graduate has a story. Actually, he has a lot of stories. Most are strange. This one is the strangest.

Last year a woman brought in a Doberman pinscher with something caught in its throat. It turned out the animal was choking on three human fingers.

The owner of the digits (a burglar) was found cowering in the woman's closet.

Each year the weirdness increases. And Plechner, who specializes in animal allergies and nutrition, isn't talking sensational weird like the Doberman story.

He's talking about a largely unreported and mostly unknown problem that is making his job dangerous.

"We are producing genetic cripples," says the 47-year-old veterinarian who believes that years of inbreeding, coupled with poor nutrition, is yielding a race of dangerous dogs.

The problem came to his attention 15 years ago, when he noticed an increase in dogs suffering from irritated eyes and dry coats.

"I thought I had missed something in school, so I started doing research," said Plechner, who had completed a year of human medical studies when he became laid up with a case of typhoid.

During his recovery he became interested in veterinary medicine. But it was his early intention to study pediatrics that prompted him to turn to hu-



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man medical research for answers to canine problems.

"I looked at studies done by pediatrician Dr. Alfred Rowe and I found that what I was observing in pets closely resembled the food allergies Rowe observed in children."

Plechner began looking at pet foods. "I found that the federally established minimum daily requirement was the premise for these concoctions. I also found that you can take beef pulp, sawdust and rubber, mix it together and it will meet the MDR. It will have no biological value but it will test out."

The beef, chicken and pork "byproducts" mentioned on many foods can legally be (and often are) "feathers, animal feces, hooves, beaks, bones and other offal too contaminated for human consumption," he said.

Plechner then set out to develop basic lamb and vegetarian diets designed to stop allergic reactions in pets.

Still, the four-legged "genetic cripples" that come to his clinic often need additional replacement hormones to digest even specially prepared diets.

Plechner finds these inbred digestive problems so troublesome that he has written the soon-to-be-released *Pet Allergies: Remedies for an Epidemic*.

"Most breeds are going bye-bye right before our eyes," he says.

Over the years he has witnessed a steady worsening of animal behavior that he attributes to breeding for structure rather than function.

"I've seen expensive dogs biting their owners. The animal can't be left with the children, the husband is threatening to leave home and the wife is agonizing over having the animal put to sleep."

And the situation won't improve, he says, until the breeders are "hit in the pocketbook."

"Here's a classic example," he said, while examining a truly dangerous



Jack Lardomita/Staff photographer

Canine malnutrition and inbreeding makes Dr. Al Plechner worry about pups like this one.

springer spaniel with the help of a nurse and a muzzle.

"This was once a gentle, stout breed of bird dog. Here it is biting show judges. His hormone levels are so far off he's schizophrenic.

"He is a hunter that can't run because of calcified discs, he can't see for cataracts, he vomits from poor diet and he's only 2."

Plechner recommends Purina, Kal-Kan, Pro-Mark and the recipes he developed for Nature's Recipe. Obtaining

a good dog is much more difficult.

"If you want a sled dog, go to Alaska where they are still bred to pull sleds. For a sheep dog, go to England where they still work. If you want better dogs, test for genetic dysfunction before breeding them," he says.

Such opinions haven't made him popular in his business.

An operator of three clinics that specialize in removing dog cataracts called Plechner (who thinks the opera-

tion is worthless) a quack because he recommended in print a new zinc-based eyedrop that seems to counteract the disease.

"I'm just a stupid clinician," he says. "I make observations hoping that the bright boys in research will look it over. But all I do is encounter stone walls. It seems that I don't have the credentials to make observations.

"Meanwhile, there's a disaster awaiting us and nobody seems to be noticing."