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Minding the Map

Medical genetics service now being piloted at the Cornell University Hospital for Animals



For centuries, people have plotted their physical course with the help of maps. With the complete genetic mapping of the canine and many other species, "maps" are now available to help us chart courses of action based on our animals' genetic compositions.

The Cornell University Hospital for Animals has begun offering medical genetics counseling to the owners of pediatric dogs/cats and to dog/cat breeders who are looking to make breeding decisions based on the genetic make-up of the animals. Medical genetics is the branch of medicine concerned with the effect of genetic variation on development and health and also with the study, diagnosis, management, and prevention of disease in individuals and communities.

"Scientists, veterinarians, and breeders have long been aware of the common genetic defects seen across species, and various lists of them have been drawn up over the years," said Dr. Rory Todhunter, who is a professor of surgery at the College and is leading the Hospital's efforts in this area. "As one of the fastest growing fields in human and veterinary medicine, medical genetics is already impacting the way we respond to inherited conditions that threaten quality of life. Understanding the predisposition for a condition opens up options for earlier medical and surgical intervention for pets".

To be launched in October 2011, the service will be piloted with guidance from Dr. Magret Casal, associate professor of medical genetics at the University of Pennsylvania who is currently completing a sabbatical at Cornell's College of Veterinary Medicine. Casal specializes in veterinary genetics, pediatrics, and reproduction. Her research interests are focused on the characterization, genetic basis, and treatment of canine genetic skin disorders that also occur in humans.

Cornell will offer appointments for patients that present with a variety of conditions that may be considered inherited or congenital. Quality breeding practices, onsite genetic counseling and phone consultations will be offered to breeders. Breed specific genetic testing panels will be offered, so that breeders avoid having to send their samples to multiple institutions. The results of these panels will be discussed with the owners as part of genetic counseling, if desired by the breeder/owner.

"The Cornell University Hospital for Animals is committed to meeting unmet veterinary medical needs," said Dr. William Horne, hospital director. "Through the medical genetics service, we expect to meet the needs of breeders who are dedicated to the health and well-being of the breed as well as to companion animal owners who want to do everything possible to ensure that their pets are happy and well cared for."

If you would like to learn more about our Pediatrics and Medical Genetics service, please contact Dr. Marta Castelhana or Dr. Rory Todhunter at (607) 253-3060 or by e-mail at vetbiobank@cornell.edu.