

Answering The Alarm

Knowing when a c-section is necessary

By Chris Walkowicz

In most emergencies, we are fortunate to have policemen, fire fighters or medics to aid us. Sirens and alarms alert us to danger.

Unfortunately, we're often alone with a bitch in labor when we face a red alert. The lives of a precious dam and her babes all depend on timely, accurate decisions made by breeders to sound the alarm. It's up to us to be their lifesavers. Our instincts will aid a veterinarian's diagnosis.

Females of all breeds occasionally undergo cesarian sections, especially those who sometimes have an incorrectable malpresentation or those delivering one-pup litters, such as toys. Not all c-sections are emergencies, however.

Bulldogs--and similarly built breeds who are not constructed for free whelping--certainly make up the greatest percentage of these canine patients. The dam's deep chest presents an uphill climb for the fetuses to reach the pelvis, and contractions may not be forceful enough to provide the oomph needed. Bulldogs are also large-bodied bitches with narrow hips attempting to deliver pups with huge heads--it's like squeezing the circus fat lady into the tightrope walker's leotards. Something's gotta give. By the time the mama Bulldog reaches parturition, it's a near impossibility for her to assist in the delivery--to tear the sacs, chew cords or lick a pup to lusty, lung-filling, life-giving cries. It's time to call the medics. Therefore, the c-section has become fairly routine for Bulldogs as well as for a few other similar breeds.

The dam's delivery date can thus be pinpointed fairly accurately, and when her temperature drops around the calculated day, breeders know delivery is imminent. That's when the red light begins flashing in the breeder's mind. A c-section is rarely done before the temperature lowers.

Veterinarians find it convenient to deal with planned cesarians. The clinic is notified as much as 24 hours in advance and can schedule the surgery during office hours when staff members are available to assist. Breeders often seek out a vet who is knowledgeable of the breed's - and the breeder's - particular needs.

Just prior to surgery, some vets administer a tranquilizer or very short-acting barbiturate followed by insertion of a tube down the windpipe for anesthetic gas, but others merely use a narcotic/tranquilizer combo, such as Innovar-Vet^R. Some use a narcotic (morphine) alone, plus a line block (novocaine along incision). Intravenous saline solutions may be administered to replace fluid loss and to prevent shock.

Alive And Squirring

Surgery, using the above lighter anesthetics, can be performed rapidly, with pups delivered alive and squirming. This is in contrast to the effects from the old, deeper barbiturate, which often caused lethargic or even stillborn pups and a sedated dam. Brachycephalic breeds, such as the Bulldog or Pekingese, as well as certain sighthound and toy breeds, are sensitive to some anesthetics. Dogs, like people, have varying responses to anesthetics and it's wise to discuss which is best for your breed with a vet.

Following delivery, mom Bulldog can be given a reversal shot for the narcotic, especially when morphine is used. With this method, she may even walk out to the car with her babes and owner! Due to selection for pain tolerance in their ancestors during development of the breed, Bulldogs seem to have little discomfort with the abdominal incision.

For other breeds, however, it's traumatic to wake up suddenly with a major abdominal incision. A slow waking from a deeper tranquilizer over a period of 12 hours helps those bitches adjust to the discomfort.

Another advantage of the "nap" surgery for Bulldog breeders is the convenience of being able to place the pups with the mother upon arrival at home.

Monitor Mom And Pups

Bulldog pups evidence their outlook on life early, often finding it too troublesome to crawl across the whelping box for food and warmth. Because of this and other troubles--such as heavy, clumsy moms who can easily squash a pup--most serious Bulldoggers use a human infant incubator to control temperature and humidity for the fragile babies. Conscientious owners stay on 24-hour duty during the intensive care period.

But no matter what the breed, pups must not be placed with a dam that is still under the influence of anesthetic and that may be disoriented. A warning grumble should be taken seriously, much like a five-alarm fire. When the bitch is still groggy, nursing times should be allowed only with the owner present policing the mother's reaction.

The best approach is to send the new family home after surgery so the breeder can monitor feedings until the mother has accepted her brood. Don't leave your bitch and pups at the vet's after a c-section unless a full-time, around-the-clock staff is available to observe the dam's reaction to the pups as carefully as you would. Since labor contractions aid the maternal instinct, it may be lacking for a time following a c-section, especially in first-time mothers.

Because contractions also aid in bringing down the milk, pups may have to be supplemented in addition to nursing on mom's all-important colostrum. If this is necessary, supplementation should continue until the milk is flowing freely and the dam is completely awake.

Whether surgery is planned or not, any breeder must be prepared for an emergency. There will be no alarms ringing. Only the subtle signs of your canine friend and the pounding of your heart will signal the alert.

Ms. Walkowicz has been a breeder since the early 1970s. Her column was honored with a 1988 DWAA award, and her most recent book, Atlas of Dog Breeds, will be published this year.

GAZETTE, Breeders Forum, July 1989, pp. 26-27.