

Patricia Gray (PG) in conversation with Anja Dietmann (AD)

Patricia Gray is a registered naturopath for animals, and has been practicing her profession for 26 years. In her practice, founded in 2011 in Hamburg, Germany, she offers holistic consultations for the well-being and proper conditioning of dogs, cats and animals in general. Since it's a common practice to castrate dogs to prevent pregnancies and false pregnancies, we are glad to have had Patricia Gray for this interview, in which she offers an alternative perspective on this topic.

AD How and for what reason does a false pregnancy occur in female dogs?

PG Dogs still have similar predispositions as their wolf ancestors, and when a wolf is in heat, she is usually not alone, but rather experiencing her heat at the same time with the others in the pack. With the pack would be the natural way of behaving for a wolf or a dog. One can translate this into human females living close together in a community; their cycles also adjust among different individuals living together. We adapt ourselves and so do wolves, and therefore dogs do too. Only one wolf would mate in nature, mostly the alpha, but the other wolves of the pack would be there to take care of the puppies, so she doesn't have to do it alone. Here is where the false pregnancy has its origin: the other wolves who are not pregnant behave as nurses, so to speak, or as aunts, who raise the puppies together with the mother. The pack raises all of the puppies together. The young animals are not allowed too many freedoms and are usually constantly controlled by the whole pack. The alpha wolf, the mother, is therefore free to go hunting or strolling, because her puppies are not alone and are indeed taken care of.

AD The alpha wolf can be in business again, back to the *office*, so to speak?

PG Exactly, because basically they all take care of the puppies together and in principle the whole pack can pursue their *jobs*, because they share the load of work. Usually not too many babies are born together; there is normally only one litter of puppies, in order to keep this system running. In some cases, breeding dogs have to take care of even 10 puppies on their own, and sometimes in breeding practices several dogs are gestating at the same time, which means more overall stress for the dogs. Typically in these cases, there would not be enough milk available and with no shared supply the dog would normally not be allowed to mate. Here one can also anticipate the question of whether a dog has the desire to have babies. Sometimes I hear, "Well, she should have babies once." I don't think that every dog is made for being a mother or even has this wish, and I think that with this perspective dogs are being humanized. Even when a dog becomes falsely pregnant and is producing milk, she is also trying to take care of others. It might be that she would also be a good mother, this is different from dog to dog, and this can be observed in their behavior during the false pregnancy. But this is the natural origin of the false pregnancy, caused by the change of hormones in her ovulation cycle. Regardless of whether a dog mated or not, her body produces the pregnancy hormone progesterone after heat. After peaking and plateauing at a high level, the progesterone concentration drops with a simultaneous increase in prolactin. Prolactin is, with other hormones, mainly responsible for the formation of the mammary gland and the *maternal feelings* that follow. It should also be noted that not every dog has milk, in some cases this is more distinct than in others. Not all dogs produce or can give milk.

AD Assuming there was a breeder who wouldn't force anything and had only one birthing dog with other dogs who wouldn't be pregnant, would the other dogs also take care of the puppies, like the wolves did?

PG This is how it actually would be. Here it can be noticed that when it comes to forcing, what I didn't realize for a long time, is that breeding dogs are sometimes forcedly restrained and impregnated. It's not funny. It's not funny and it's not nice. There are also breeders who may allow the female to choose the male, but if it is about breeds that bring in money, then the breeders in most cases have to rely on buying semen. The sperm will have been checked for its quality and its value in advance; what a crazy industry. This means that a male dog owner can earn a lot of money but also that the impregnation rates have to be reliable. AD If the sharing of labor in the pack is not met, can the mother be overwhelmed with the work on her own?

PG Yes, exactly. When a dog has 10 puppies, she has to carry a lot and the mammary glands have to work a lot too. There are not always 10 puppies, but it would make sense to get another nurse. In breeding, however, industrial milk substitute is usually added to the puppy's intake rather quickly, which is not good for their overall health and all in all it is not a good combination. When a dog is fed naturally, with meat and not with dry food, and when she chooses the male dog herself, she may only get 3-4 puppies because that is more natural.

AD When a dog has to raise so many puppies on their own, can the excessive demands lead to postpartum depression, as in humans?

PG I haven't seen this happen so far.

AD But having to raise 10 children alone at the same time...

PG Yes, one cannot get depressed there. You would be too busy. It's only possible that the puppies are taken away from the mother sooner because she is too stressed, or they are given away faster by the breeder, but never before eight weeks, because the puppies are still too small. 10 weeks or 12 weeks makes more sense. AD Is there also a positive function of a false pregnancy, when a dog is on her own and doesn't live in the pack?

PG Not really. Some can get very withdrawn, too clingy, they might not want to eat or to go for a walk and that would be more like some kind of depression. But normally, the dog can be treated with homeopathy very well to make sure she is happy again. Most false pregnancies occur six weeks after heat; that is when she would have had the puppies. But then she has no one to take care of and no one to build a nest for. Some even build a nest for their imaginary puppies, in which they carry and mother different things like toys or stuffed animals. I would say that this should be taken into serious consideration. A dog is in heat about twice a year, which means that some dogs have just overcome a false pregnancy, then there is a short break, but then the hormone level rises again because the next heat is building up. Then might come another false pregnancy and so on. This is exhausting and you have to see if you want to consider castration in these cases, when the dog is very impacted by it and you can't get it under control with homeopathy and other supporting measures.

Some even have a male dog and a female dog but do not want any offspring. Then it might become difficult and mostly it would be the female who gets castrated and not the male dog. But

castrating a male dog is a much easier operation compared to the castration of a female dog, which is a very big operation.

AD Is there a law that protects the gender of animals?

PG Yes, there is. According to the German Animal Protection Law, the complete or partial amputation of body parts or the complete or partial removal or destruction of organs of a spinal animal is not allowed. Castrations are legally considered amputations. Medical interventions in the body of an animal, such as its castration, are only permitted in individual cases if there is a veterinary indication. Castrations are also permitted if the uncontrolled reproduction of an animal is prevented or, if there are no veterinary concerns, an animal is to be made infertile for further use or domesticating¹. Of course, dogs also have the right of physical integrity, and castration without medical reason is actually bodily injury. But it is done nevertheless. If I decide to go to the vet and say, "I want to have her castrated," then it can happen that I go to a vet who informs me about the negative consequences, but it can also happen that I get an appointment right away. AD Wouldn't something have to change in the educational system for veterinarians to have a better understanding of the consequences of castration?

PG Yes and no. Some veterinarians inform the owners about the consequences of castration and some do not. That's not to say that the doctors don't know, they just don't inform the dog owners as much. I've heard and seen it all. As with doctors for humans, there are some that are good and there are others that are not, and we have to make sure that we go to the good ones. For a while it was mandatory to castrate a dog before her first heat, for the prevention of mammary tumors. But from my point of view it doesn't make any sense. Organs cannot be taken out under the assumption that no new cancer can be developed. If there is a disposition for cancer, then this disposition is not only concentrated on certain organs like the uterus, the mammary ridge or on the teats. In an adult dog who has tumors on the mammary ridge, one can observe that the tumors are getting bigger during heat. There is already this connection between the hormone surge, heat, and the growth of the ulcers. There are also benign ulcers, but even these have a growth spurt due to the hormones. Sometimes this looks very frightening, but after castration they are often smaller. Here you can clearly see a connection. That means if the vet suggests removing the mammary ridge or ulcers, then it is often said that it would make sense to castrate the dog. It is always a question of balancing pros and cons and one must decide case by case what is best for the dog. A dog that has been castrated before the first heat, however, will never really grow up and will always go crazy in her hormones, so to speak, which can be seen not only in her behavior, but also in her coat. The hormones are important for the development of the skeletal system, for the musculature and

for the whole being. An early castration, as was practiced in the USA for a long time, is not usually done anymore. In Germany, for instance, it can be practiced only after at least six months. But that is still much too early. To translate into human terms, it would be like taking the sex organs out of a 12 or 13 year old girl. That is not acceptable and that is not prevention. Prevention looks different to me.

AD When might castration be reasonable?

PG I have a dog here for treatment who suffers a lot from the side effects of her false pregnancies. As with some women who can lose hair and eyebrows during pregnancy, dogs can lose their coat. This dog also loses the few hairs she has on her belly and is very allergic. I haven't heard anything from the family for a long time, but we have done some homeopathic treatment and I think the owner is now considering castrating her dog because this dog really suffers from the hormonal fluctuations and can have a lot more peace and quiet with castration. But this dog is already an adult and it is something different when I have an adult animal castrated, versus a young one. The skeletal system, the musculature are fully developed, and also the character has developed. The dog was allowed to become an adult.

AD What other consequences and side effects can a castration have?

PG In the past, it was always said that a castrated dog who weighs more than 20 kilos tends to become incontinent, mostly in the first two years after castration. But I've also had dogs in treatment that weighed less and still became incontinent or became incontinent in old age. This whole hanging apparatus of the bladder, and in principle also how the organs are positioned inside, is no longer there, and therefore the sphincter muscle does not work properly anymore. This can be treated homeopathically, but when it's not, some of these dogs are given hormones to heal. A dog can't do pelvic muscle training, unlike us. Of course, it would help but it would be difficult to communicate with a dog to "tense your muscles." That is not possible. Very few veterinarians practice sterilization, in which the fallopian tubes are clamped up but the uterus is not removed so that there is no danger of incontinence because everything stays in its place. Here, there is this pro and con, because the uterus can still become inflamed, which is why many people decide to have everything removed instead. But usually it is the castration that is done because the mood swings caused by the heat are not wanted. With sterilization, she would still be in heat and could have intercourse with males but would not become pregnant. But then we have the other problem, the other side of the coin, namely the lovesick males, who are lovesick when they constantly smell female dogs in heat. This is a problem, particularly in cities, because there are so many dogs that are in heat. The males do not eat properly because of their sorrow, they have diarrhea, and can also have hormone disorders.

1) § 6 Abs. 1 Nr.5 des TierSchG, available online at <https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/tierschg/BJNR012770972.html>, last accessed on August 29, 2020.