

Rx For Whelping and Ceasarians

by Barbara J. Andrews

Sooner or later, every experienced breeder encounters whelping problems. We are conditioned to accept, and even to expect problems with certain breeds. Worse yet, we're told that bitches who deliver by caesarian may reject or even kill their puppies.

What a pity for a creature programmed to cherish and protect her offspring with her very life. And what a miscarriage of common sense that needlessly puts the breeder through weeks of sleepless nights, round the clock feedings, and constant worry. A bad experience can lead to erroneous concerns about whether or not to breed a valuable bitch again, and indeed, final decisions are frequently based on a litter which fails to reach optimum health, vitality, and structural potential.

There are logical reasons why caesarian surgeries impose hardships on the bitch and her anxious owner. There are equally sensible solutions but first, a little tweaking to your overall perception of the process will make this much more palatable.

C-sections are sometimes necessary to spare the bitch and save the pups. It is how we deal with labor and the immediate aftermath of surgery that will determine its effect on the dam and her whelps. Our well intentioned interference wreaks havoc on a process which has worked for thousands of years. True, some newborns fail to survive the harshness of nature but in fact, they are almost always lost to predators or natural tragedies, not to lack of mothering. Were we to believe the confusing array of books, seminars, and expert advice which surrounds us nowadays, we could only surmise that the dinosaurs became extinct because there were no humans to whelp and rear them!

Hand rearing frequently results in a generation of maladjusted canines who have been deprived of the constant licking, rough nosing about, tactile sensations, feeding rivalry, and the most basic learning experiences necessary to survive the first few weeks of life. Good dams beget good dams and for much more than genetic reasons. A female puppy deprived of the complex sensory and hormonal stimuli as well as the social interactions that naturally occur from birth to weaning is ill equipped to handle her own future litter.

Start with basics. The newborn is instinctively drawn to the warm comfort of the udder, groin, and genital areas of his dam. Getting there however, is a learning process that begins with a good mother's guidance as she rolls and prods him in the right direction. Notice how she breathes on him. She isn't smelling him, his individual scent was imprinted in her deepest being before she had finished licking the birth fluids away. No, she is leading him with her warm breath back to the constant and perfect environment of her cuddle curl. (More on that later.)

Contrast this with the whelp forced to lay on a dry heating pad or under the harsh light of an equally dehydrating heat lamp. Pups are born in dark places and are rarely exposed to bright light until after the eyes open. Their eyelids are closed for a reason. Close your own eyes. Shine a flashlight towards your eyes. Got it? The brightness filters through your closed lids. If you won't allow her to whelp in the closet, at least give her a dark sheltered quiet room. Throw the heat lamps out. If you have orphan pups, give them a hospital quality moist-heat pad in one corner of a covered box.

If the artificially heated pup becomes too warm, there is no escape, no way to regulate his barely functioning thermostat. Human hands helpfully put him back in the heated area and the more he cries in discomfort, the more likely he is to be placed again and again in the heat. A brand new little body that is just learning how to react to outside stimuli begins to show the effects within hours. He develops painful stomach cramps, "bird-seed diarrhea", and breathing difficulties. Improperly diagnosed and treated, he will die. The telltale yellow stool with little greenish lumps is undigested milk. Just as a chilled whelp can not digest milk, neither can an overheated one. The trip to the vet wherein he is taken out of the hot environment is often the first relief he has. He quiets down, grateful for the respite. All too soon, he's brought home and hurriedly placed back in the overheated nest whereupon he again begins to crawl and cry.

I can't count the calls from breeders who, home from the vet with dutifully medicated pups, find them no better off. A few careful questions will often result in the prescriptive "put them in the bathtub for five minutes and call me back." The results are nothing sort of miraculous! Commit this to memory, it can prevent incalculable stress for you, your litter, and your friends. A word of caution. Should you lay this aside or fail to grasp the overall concept, please be sure the pups are in fact trying to crawl away from the heat source. If they are fanned out like spokes in a wheel, "crying and crawling," the bathtub trick will work like magic. If however, they are "piled" on top of each other in the nest, or if after three minutes on the cool porcelain they do not fall into exhausted sleep, the problem is not overheating and you may need to find another vet.

A newborn learns cause-and-effect behavior in the first few hours of life. Instead of having a tube forced down his throat and his stomach filled with more than it was designed to process at one time, he learns to bump the nipple repeatedly to demand nourishment when he needs it. Another life lesson occurs as he performs the food-by-demand ritual and is gratified by the let-down of her milk. He sucks vigorously, aggressively, developing the pushy, survival-at-all-costs attitude which will ultimately determine his adaptability to the hazards of life, with or without human management. A newborn unable to join to the nipple for frequent small meals, one that never learns to fight for his place but who is instead force fed according to the human attendant's schedule, inevitably becomes an adult with a quiescent reasoning ability and a lackadaisical attitude about life in general. Never having

experienced the most basic neo-natal struggles and achievements, if at some point in life, he suffers hunger, cold, pain, or fear, he is the poor doggie that will just sit and whimper in befuddlement.

When pups are bottle or tube fed, we are told to gently stimulate evacuation by cleansing the genital area with cotton balls moistened in warm water. What we are not told is that it should be very warm water. Shocking a newborn with tepid formula or cleansing cotton is a common mistake. "Body temperature" in a human feels quite cool to a dog whose temperature averages 101.5 degrees! When pups are learning to eat from a bowl, toy breeds may be turned off by the cold edges touching warm throats. They may quickly seem to lose interest in the food when in fact, they are hungry but the cold sensation translates as something unknown and inedible. A dog's temperature is almost three degrees higher than our own so sensory stimulation should be considerably warmer than the "wrist test" used for human babies.

If a bitch is spayed concurrent with a c-section, she may not be given an oxytocin injection or may have been spayed early in the labor stage, may be extremely stressed or for any number of other seldom considered reasons, she may fail to make milk. With the uterus removed and hormonal releases cut short by interruption of the birth mechanism, the milk just never comes down. Large breed matrons or those that bagged up in the last few days of gestation may slip by the breeder's notice. As the experienced bitch goes through the instinctive motions of nursing, cleaning, and comforting, the breeder may fail to notice that the initial milk supply has run out. Pups who never knew they were supposed to have milk can just lay there and quietly starve as will pups who experience a gradual lessening of the milk supply. The breeder who weighs or instinctively notes that the pups are not "firm and fully packed" may be puzzled. Within two to three days, dehydration becomes so evident that even the most novice breeder realizes something is horribly wrong. By this point, it will take heroic effort to save the whelps. Any vet who fails to warn the litter owner of the possible side effects of cesarean-spaying or extreme stress should be held accountable. It is gross negligence too often compounded by an attempted cover up of scientifically worded garble designed to lay blame on the bitch's "poison milk" or pups who were somehow defective and "wouldn't nurse and caused the bitch to dry up." Beware.

The Cuddle Curl is an ingenious tool for all moms that nest; felines, canines, bears, even rodents. Bitches deprived of the natural birth process may never fully develop the protective posture that regulates temperature, controls a large brood, and insures the babies are not laid or stepped on. By the way, pups that are too warm crawl away from the heat source. Although mom will uncurl, even roll onto her back to allow mammary heat to escape, she can do little to change an overly warm environment. Pups will scatter and are at risk of being squashed as opposed to properly regulated whelps snuggled to the teat or neatly piled. Understanding the remarkable multi-purpose mothering device came after an enlightening discussion with Dan Greenwald, one of the greatest dog men we've ever known.

I was shocked when two decades ago, my dear friend Meg Purnell-Carpenter, over for a visit from the U.K. chastised me for changing the soiled papers in the flexible plastic (child's wading) whelping pool. Since then, I use newspaper under rubber gridmats, placing a thick wad of paper towels directly under the vulva of our Akita bitches. The absorbent pad soaks up the voluminous birth fluids and can be discreetly changed after each delivery. Excess fluids drain down through the rubber mat so that mom is kept clean, quiet, and undisturbed. She can lick and clean with no risk of ingesting ink dyes nor will the wet whelps absorb newsprint chemicals.

So it was that while reporting a free whelping on our co-owned Chihuahua, I began to yawn as Dan cautioned that the nest should not be changed during the first week. She had delivered three pups in her foam cuddle bed after having disdainfully removed the plain white cotton blankee and no, I hadn't changed a thing. We were soon laughing about people who are horrified by visions of germs destroying their precious puppies. Were it a risk, that Rhodes Scholar of all carnivora, Mrs. Wily Coyote, would have long ago learned to use disinfectant.

We agreed that knowledge which older dog people, farmers, and ranchers grew up with is all too often obscured by today's technical teachings and practices. Without human interference, the farm dog has her pups under the porch, in the barn, wherever she chooses - and she chooses well. After all, her ancestors still find the right place at the right time. You will select the place but your bitch must be allowed at least two weeks to make her nest her own. Please don't plop her down in a fancy whelping bed which you keep sterilizing. She won't be relaxed and accepting of it any more than you would be comfortable delivering your first born in the Group ring at Westminster. Just as she arranges the bedding, imparting it with her scent, and hangs her curtains so to speak, you come along and take away all her familiar things and tell her to deliver her babies in the confines of a hostile, chemically treated, artificial square box. Please!

Back to the Cuddle Curl. Dan went on to explain how a good mother will instinctively wrap around her whelps. We laughed as I described how our Mini-Bulls, unable to bend their muscular little bodies, tuck the pups under their chest and then fold down on top of them with mom's head upside down under the sternum. The classic bullie-snooze position enables her breath to warm the incubator she built with her not-so-pliant Bullie-body.

So depending on the breed, the Cuddle Curl has some variations but accomplishes the same remarkable objective. The snugness of the curl regulates temperature as effectively as does a mother hen's fluffing of feathers over her eggs. The bitch's body holds the moist heat resulting from her post whelp drainage. It traps and magnifies the hormone-laden scents which evoke all sorts of poorly understood mechanisms designed to comfort the whelps, promote healing, and slow down her metabolism so that she will in fact "lay int" for the minimum 72 hours.

Left to her own devices, she would survive the first few days on the consumed afterbirth. Please allow her to have the bloody mess. It may be repulsive to you but healthy placenta and birth fluids are laden with as yet unidentified enzymes and hormones as well as vital nourishment designed to see her through "confinement." We interfere in ways offensive to her and to nature. We deprive her of placenta and then solicitously offer the wrong food that speeds up her metabolism at a time when she should just sleep quietly for a few days. When she then becomes agitated, we give her drugs or herbs to relax her. Then instead of leaving her alone, we force her into activity, making her leave the nest to empty a bladder that is possibly performing some miraculous recycling job which converts waste fluid into milk! Who knows? We simply should not intrude on the dam's way of cleaning her nest and pups, regulating their temperatures, and her natural instinct to "lay in" with her litter! Be solicitous, let her go out when she expresses that need, but otherwise, let her do what she knows is best for herself and her whelps.

Scientists have spent enough to buy a Pedigree Award in trying to unravel the miracle of momma-bear who gives birth and nurtures young while in a somnambulistic state. It is said that unraveling her medical secrets will benefit society. Perhaps. Or perhaps science should not violate mother nature's mysteries.

Some things are not mysterious. They are simple common sense. For instance, you are about to learn why bitches reject or kill their puppies and more importantly, you will know how to prevent such behavior. In the meantime, just tell your pregnant friend that you are trying to understand her just half as well as she understands you.

Barring medical complications, minimal human interference is the best thing you can do for the dam and litter. Today's fanciers are conditioned to believe that the species would become extinct were it not for our helping hands. Actually, the domestic canine is in some danger but it is due to genetic manipulation and distortions of instincts that have preserved the dog for thousands of years. The first instinct is self-preservation and humans have been known to controvert behavior patterns designed to guarantee survival of the individual and the species. We seem even more compelled to interfere with the second most powerful mammalian instinct, the desire to reproduce. We prevent days of courtship and for obvious reasons, natural selection. We then go so far as to artificially impregnate the female.

The reproductive drive should be strong and efficient. Left to their own devices, mammals are pretty good at producing and nurturing. We do recognize that the world is a rather hostile place what with so much concrete, carpet, and cars but there must be balance between assistance and interference.

None of us would consciously stress the brood matron any more than we would knowingly cause harm to the litter. And yet we do. We blunder right into the middle of the reproductive process and then wonder why purebreds have so many problems whereas mutts and farms dogs still seem able to conceive, whelp, and rear their young quite handily!

There is a sensible compromise between puppy mill management (basically a disregard for the safety, comfort, and well-being of the dogs) as compared to the over-protectiveness of the dedicated Breeder. Neither allows the dam to control her whelping environment although the commercial producer is more likely to leave the bitch alone during the critical "laying in" period which among other things, completes the bonding process. Newborns are exposed to bright light, over or under feeding, and unnatural stimulation. The whelp's first learning opportunities are unwittingly compromised by Breeders and ignored by puppy producers.

One of the most troublesome breeding experiences is the cesarean section. It's uncommon in Arctic/spitz, herding, and hunting breeds and when necessary, it rarely results in post delivery complications. Cesareans are most often needed in toy dogs or breeds with unusually large heads and narrow pelvic girdles. The odds of surgical intervention increase when the dog is also short coupled and "firmly packed."

For example, Bulldogs and Pekinese are at double risk due to their unique heads, pear shaped and rather inflexible bodies. Bullies and Bostons, Chihuahuas and Chows - the list is complex and when viewed through the spectacles of perspective, it presents a problem begging for solutions.

This is not meant to suggest that breeders should go backwards or sacrifice the wonderful features of type that distinguish such breeds. The point is that new generations of breeders are having a difficult time coping with the ever-increasing need for c-sections and the frustrating consequences. The shrinking group of experienced dog people seem less inclined to waste time passing on stock-sense to new breeders who are too often here today, gone tomorrow. Those who do become passionate about creating a canine masterpiece have fewer and fewer resources for common sense advice. In many critical areas, Science has replaced Nature.

Successful breeders have already made the acquaintance of a breeder's best friend, Common Sense. Novice fanciers struggling with today's textbooks can avoid many of the problems encountered by learning management techniques that have served man and his animal friends for centuries.

Firstly, if you think there is the slightest risk of surgical delivery, be prepared. Talk to your vet. Explain that you don't want an appointment for surgery, that you prefer to allow the bitch an opportunity to deliver naturally and failing that, you want her to experience as much natural labor as is safe for her. Most vets will advise against this plan but you may be fortunate (or persuasive) enough to have a vet who will go along with you. Most vets are not on call for their clients. Economics outweigh loyalty and you are likely to be directed to the emergency clinic at 2:00 AM. That being the case, ask your vet to do a phone call introduction to the emergency veterinarian and staff prior to her expected delivery date. Which by the way, can be as much as five days prior to the traditional sixty-third day.

Give her newspaper or paper towels to shred, arrange, and rearrange during the nesting period. If you have provided a proper, private “den” area and the bitch is allowed to completely indulge in nesting routine, she can be expected to settle in comfortably with her new family whether they arrive by c-section or not.

Even though you know she will be surgically delivered, she should be allowed to progress far enough into labor wherein she will concentrate on licking her nipples and vulva (and everything else within reach) and ideally, her water should break. She will then become quite serious about licking and arranging her bed so that even with the interruption of a trip straight into surgery, she will be much more likely to take up where she left off upon returning home and regaining her wits. The pre-delivery licking is tremendously important as it coincides with hormonal release and lays an important foundation for the bonding behavior between mother and whelp. The first time dam who is trotted off to surgery without benefit of the nesting, licking, cleaning behavior is one who will likely never develop good mothering skills. She is more apt to reject or be frightened by those odd squirmy little things she awakens to find in her bed.

By now you are beginning to understand why there is a higher rate of apathy or aggressive behavior exhibited by short coupled breeds. It is more difficult for a Boston to reach around to lick the genital area. For a pregnant Frenchie, it is almost impossible! Combine the physical limitations with a higher cesarean rate and the predisposition towards offspring rejection is directly affected. Ahh but there is a solution.

After having allowed her to perform as much of the pre-delivery pattern as is safe, insist that the veterinary surgeon save one very wet placenta. To emphasize the importance of the request, as you gather the bitch, receiving box, blanket, (and of course, your credit card!) be sure to toss in a zip lock freezer bag. If you have reason to believe the round trip will take more than three hours, refrigerate the placenta, otherwise, your very important nursery tool will keep quite nicely.

Upon returning home, settle the bitch and pups and hope she will take notice of them. You can try rubbing them across her vulva but my advice is to take no chances. Prepare the placenta by placing the plastic bag in hot water. When she is alert enough to respond to you, dip the pup’s rear quarters into the bag, then dump the whole mess under her tail as you discreetly place the pups at her rear.

If she was plucked from the nest in the midst of cleaning herself (accompanied by the release of endorphins), her reaction now should be classic. She feels the same pain as before surgery, and she associates it not with the whelps but with licking, cleaning, and satisfaction. So what will she do? Sniff at the mess you’ve quietly made, then clean herself, then with no hovering interference and no break in concentration, she’ll begin to lick her messy whelps. You can now sit back, relax, and admire motherhood functioning as nature intended.

Of course you will watch her closely. She may have mood swings. She may be restless. Both can be aided by a bowl of warm milk, calcium and vitamin "C" appropriate for her size, and if you are knowledgeable about herbs, a bit of valerian and skullcap. She should be otherwise left in a cool darkened room to sleep and recover. A serving of warm raw calves liver should be offered the first time she seems hungry but food should be otherwise limited to milk, broth, meat, or a light gruel of oatmeal for the next 72 hours after which she can go back on her regular high quality diet. Offer water free choice.

Take her out to eliminate only when she lets you know she is ready. You can encourage her to change sides but if she resists, do not force her. Change her pads or matting only after 24 hours and do so while she is outside with a friend or family member. Be sure to leave some small pieces of her original bedding. Handle the pups daily, but gently. Imagine being swooped up or dropped ten stories in an elevator and you will understand why pups go rigid when similarly handled. Gradually expose them to bright light only after the eyes are open.

Play music for them. Enjoy them. Love them and be proud as they leave for new homes and new adventures.

You and she have done this right!