

A Summary History of the BIWG by Steve Green (Past President).

The Beginning

In the year 2000 the KBS, Swiss BMD breed club, decided to hold the first international health seminar exclusively for Bernese Mountain Dogs in Langenthal and invited clubs from around the world to attend, around half a dozen of us attended from the GB club. There were invited speakers from these clubs outlining various health schemes their club was involved in and I was asked to present a summary of the recent UK Bernese health survey I had conducted. I remember spending ages producing my **overhead slides** full of charts and bullet points and is hard to imagine the world before Powerpoint now! I can't remember an exact number of people present from all over the Bernese World, (I think 200) but the large conference room set in a converted industrial building was packed and the week-end was a great success.

Following Meetings

Two years later the Swiss club repeated the exercise, this time in Lensburg and Dr Malcolm Willis was the invited speaker from the UK summarising the 'Trembler' situation we had dealt with in the UK some years earlier. Again there were BMD speakers from numerous countries updating the Bernese world on breed health issues their clubs were dealing with.

The next year, 2003, the event moved on to be hosted by the German SSV club in Hohenroda, but, much to my deep regret, no one from the UK attended. At this meeting the first ideas about a working group began to be developed so the idea, if not the name, of the BIWG was conceived with Dr Norbert Bachmann from the German club, SSV, as its President.

Two years later in December 2005 the meeting was held in a Christmasy Salzburg in Austria hosted by the Austrian Swiss Breeds club, VSSO. At this meeting the discussion continued about the structure and processes of the group to collect and collate health information about the Bernese Mountain Dog so that we could all learn from each other and share our experiences. There was some energetic discussion at this meeting as we debated the basis of the group. There were concerns from some quarters about the sharing of information between fully recognised main FCI breed clubs and second breed clubs and also with other country's non FCI clubs, found mostly in the English speaking parts of the world, such as the BMDC of GB. I became involved in this discussion as I was keen that all the breed clubs from the UK, America and Australia for example were not excluded from the group. It was eventually agreed that all dedicated BMD or Swiss Mountain Breed clubs could join as it was completely voluntary what information anyone wished to share. It was at this meeting that the name of Berner International Working Group, BIWG, was agreed as well as the overall objective of the group. Known as 'Objective 10' and devised and explained by Martha Cehrs from the Swiss club, the stated purpose was to work towards a time when all Bernese born could expect to have a life expectancy of at least 10 years instead of the 7 years, or even less, that seemed to be fairly typical around the world at the time.

The other notable first at this meeting was the attendance of Dr Catherine Andre from the University of Rennes and this was the first time the Bernese world outside France heard of the emerging French research into Malignant Histiocytosis, (as we mostly referred to it then). I still remember feeling awe at the schematic of the pedigree with (I think) over 400 dogs on it, that showed that 'Histio' followed an familial pattern which proved it had an hereditary influence. The obvious massively significant point being proved here for the first time was that if you can identify that hereditary influence you can reduce the occurrence with managed breeding choices. I don't think any of us realised just how difficult this 'simple sounding' task would prove to be and how long it would be before we were given a genetic test to utilise but I still recall the excitement at this first news delivered at the International meeting. Since then Catherine and her soon to join colleague Dr

Benoit Hedan have become great friends of the BIWG. They have presented an update to the BIWG and the Health Seminar at every event since and we have watched the research and subsequently the testing develop over the years and everyone who appreciates the size of the cancer problem we have cannot fail to have been enthralled by its story.

The following year the all too short lived Italian breed club SIBBS hosted the seminar in a fantastic lakeside hotel on Lake Como in the Italian Lakes. I think this seminar was the first where the BIWG had a separate meeting scheduled over the week-end at the end of, and independent from, the seminar itself. This week-end also had a second UK person present in the form of the then Southern club Secretary Irene Soper making the week-end a part of a family holiday.

Due to the administration structure in some countries it was clear a few clubs still seemed to feel a little threatened by this new group and it was clear our group could not properly settle until this was resolved and consequently I agreed to work on a constitution for the group to try to address this for the next meeting. I based this loosely on parts of the British Bernese Breed Council constitution which was designed to bring club together, as (I think) I was Breed Council Secretary at the time.

2007 was the Swiss club's big centenary year and they hosted the International get together for the third time with the international Seminar being held on a completely different day to the BIWG meeting for the first time, fully emphasising its emerging status. This event being a part of the huge Centenary show week-end in Burgdorf. I presented my proposed constitution at the BIWG meeting and it was accepted as addressing all the necessary points. As a group we deliberately stated in this constitution that we had no interest in dictating any rules, conditions, judges, fees, to anybody. We also decided not to hold any funds or have a bank account. We were completely a discussion and health related information collecting group for the benefit of the breed and meetings were to be sponsored by the hosting clubs. We relied on support from our members clubs to host our meetings but no other form of finance was required unless individual clubs wished to assist with the expenses of their own representatives. Our small running costs, web site hosting for example, were and still are covered by personal donations from our regular attendees.



Personally, I was honoured to be chosen as the new President of the BIWG at this meeting and later took part in the health seminar outlining the BIWG meeting and explaining the group to about 200 hundred people in a large local college lecture theatre, including a handful from the UK. As the new President it was also a pleasure to help to hand over a large cheque from SIBB to Catherine Andre's research as well as a further cheque to some multi international collaborative research into our breed's cancer headed by Dr Johan de Vos (Netherlands), Dr Janos Butinar (Slovenia) and the UK's Dr Mike Brearley.

The photo also shows the three Presidents of the BIWG to date, Dr Bachmann in the centre rear, Martha Cehrs along from him on the back row and myself on the end. Dr Catherine Andre is holding the large cheque at the very front.

The next meeting in 2009, was hosted by CIABS the main Italian club, again within the Italian Lake district but this time on the shores of Lake Garda and this time 3 people attended from the UK when I was accompanied by Bernice Mair and Louise Harrington, both now sadly departed and much missed who both also came to the BIWG meeting the day after the health seminar. (Typically, despite urging, Bernice declined to be in the post meeting photograph). As BIWG President I had closed the breed health seminar the previous day with a short presentation on the BIWG and then an invite to our own event in two years time. At the BIWG meeting we welcomed several new clubs to the group.



A new Decade

We moved on to our own Ruby Jubilee in 2011 when we hosted the BIWG meeting and International Health Seminar at the Woodside Hotel and Conference centre in Kenilworth as part of our Championship show and Sunday Funday week-end at nearby Stoneleigh Park. My memories of the BIWG meeting itself, which I had organised and chaired, are of it being a little chaotic at the start as over three times the amount of people who had booked to attend turned up on the day. Fortunately, rather than turn people away, we were lucky enough to be able to change to a larger room and proceed with the meeting, albeit a bit later than planned.



Looking at this photo from the meeting I can see Bernese people from America, Finland, Eire, Denmark, Sweden, UK, Belgium, Switzerland, Spain, Canada, Germany, Austria, Italy, France (and one or two I am not sure of their origin).

As has become regular practice as BIWG President I gave a summary of the BIWG and our meeting at the health seminar the next day where about 90 people, listened to breed relevant speakers from around the world. The health seminar was a great success, with really cheap entry cost and an informative 60+ page booklet thrown in giving summaries of the presentations and useful details of each club represented. However, in one of the Q & A sessions, one of the questions from the floor was 'where were all the British breeders?' as it was felt by some that for the first time the overseas visitors outnumbered the hosting country's attendees.

In 2013 the Swiss club yet again generously hosted the week-end for the 4th time to co-incide with their CAC show staged just outside Geneva. At the BIWG meeting held before the other events I stood down as President and was replaced by Martha Cehrs from the KBS who had always been very active and a mainstay of the International gatherings from the very first in 2000. Martha had been instrumental in developing the BIWG and very supportive of the principles of breed health.



The photo below shows Catherine Andre and Benoit Hedan presenting the latest update from the French research to the BIWG meeting. I think it was at this meeting that they first outlined the

beginnings of the 'Histio' test that was being developed and tested in France. In addition to the countries represented in 2011 there was also a Russian presence at this meeting for the first time.



In 2015 the International BMD week-end was hosted by the Finnish Swiss Mountain Breeds club in Helsinki to coincide with their own Ruby Jubilee and show and again was well attended with, I think, three of us from the UK attending, Jeanette, Helen Davenport Willis and myself. This get together also saw the first of the International BMD Judges meetings which was well supported and over ran its time slot.

The host in 2017 was the large French Swiss breeds club, AFBS, as a part of their Champ show week-end, in the village of Lamotte Beuvron, several hours South of Paris. We met the day before the show started and I found myself chairing our meeting as unfortunately Martha Cehrs was unable to attend, due to a last minute, poorly dog. We had two really good sessions here, an informal "what do you want to talk about" type session where everyone engaged and contributed and then the more structured meeting later and I remember these being very constructive and stimulating much more discussions over the coming days. At the health seminar the French researchers were present with their Antagene counterparts and one of them presented the proposed 'Histio' database for the first time. It was still to be funded and constructed but the principle sounded very exciting, especially when explained alongside mentions of an embryonic future blood test and possible beginnings of a treatment for Histio. The French club and its members should be really acknowledged by our breed for the effort and support they have put into the 'Histio' research over the years both financially and in supporting the research with essential dogs and samples.



The funding they asked for to develop the web site database was subsequently donated by some of the attending BMD clubs and the HSIMS initiative was launched in February 2019 and was a hot topic at Crufts a few weeks later.

The Most Recent Meeting

In 2018, only a year after gathering in France, we had been invited to join with the Dutch BMD club, VBSH, for their Ruby Jubilee week-end celebrations which followed the World Show in Amsterdam, making a great 12 days or so for me. Although due to its size the Health seminar had to be held at a large, modern hotel function room, the meetings and the show were hosted at a stunning chateau property courtesy of the club President. With Michelin starred food and lovely traditional decor we felt a little bit special as visitors to the crowded meetings and evening events which again included the International BMD judges meeting.

I recall when this photo was taken on the chateau steps after the BIWG meeting quite a few people had already left to leave to catch flights but it still shows a very multi national gathering. As you can see, if you want to study the photos, there is a hard core of regulars but each time there are some new people representing new clubs that clubs that attend the meeting and this is very encouraging.



So what is the BIWG today?

In essence the BIWG is a mechanism for the various breed clubs from around the world to send representatives to gather and discuss health issues affecting the Bernese Mountain Dog and how their club or country is learning about and tackling them. Even in this increasingly homogenised world it is still the case that all countries come at these problems from different standpoints, histories and cultures so have different viewpoints and experiences of them. Actions that are commonplace in one country might not be allowed in others, for example in some countries health test results are made public and in others they are completely private and only disclosed by the individuals. In some countries it is *compulsory* to be club members in order to show and breed and in order to be a club member you *have to share* your own health information and *have to take part* in health initiatives whereas in other countries you can just decide not to health test or contribute any health information but still breed and/or show. The BIWG is not, and actually could never be, about anyone telling anyone what they should or shouldn't do nor is it about anyone saying what is the

right and wrong way to deal with health issues because sometimes things that work in one country might not work or even be legally possible in another. It is simply about hearing what each club is doing and learning from each other and making links to ask questions in the future.

We can all learn from each other and there is still a place in this world for proper old fashioned face to face discussion. As anyone who has been to any similar kind of event will confirm lots of, if not even more, interesting discussions and learning takes place in the bars, cafes, lobbies and restaurants around these events during breakfast lunch and tea and, when you add ringside time to this as well, much debate occurs right from first arrival and I have been sat discussing events at the airport and, even after a long week-end, ending up rushing to catch my plane home!

Meetings

The BIWG Meetings have to be restricted to people representing their clubs and prepared to give a short report from their country. The costs of the meeting are kindly met by the hosting club as the BIWG has no funds. All official BMD Breed clubs are invited to send a representative to each BIWG meeting. The exact frequency probably averages out at about 2 years but depends on the generosity of clubs offering to host the meeting, usually to co-incide with an event of their own.

In addition there are a number of regular experts who are welcome, such as Catherine Andre and Benoit Hedan, and some founding stalwarts of the organisation who are allowed to continue to attend at the discretion of the group. It then very much depends on the venue size but interested non participants who are not representing clubs, or countries where there is no recognised club, are welcome to attend as individuals but only if there is enough space. This is down to the hosting club to organise and manage once the BIWG has said how many people are officially attending. Sometimes the meetings are almost all about the health reports from each country but sometimes there are procedural issues to discuss as well. The idea is that all representatives both report from their country to the BIWG community but also back to their clubs so that the clubs and members are informed. As I cannot stress too often, it is simply about sharing information from club to club and experts to clubs and learning from each other for the benefit of the Bernese Mountain Dog.

Some representatives have professional veterinary or scientific related backgrounds, others are breeders or just serious owners but all have interest in improving the health of the breed at heart.

I have many happy memories from these trips and experiences far too long winded and mostly inconsequential to recount here in this brief history. I have made some real Bernese friends from many countries all with Breed health as a priority for them. Some are breeders, some are exhibitors, some 'just' conscientious owners but we all have the long term interest of the breed at heart.

Some people dismiss the BIWG as a 'talking shop' and as a body with no powers but for me that is a strength not a weakness. We have no axes to grind with any club or country so people can come and speak freely about their own country's situation without fear of judgement. All countries have different resources, capabilities, histories, regulations, laws, cultures to deal with and what is acceptable in one country may even be illegal in another.

There cannot be any 'one size fits all' solution to our breed's health issues. Having said that, certainly across Europe but also across the world it seems welfare reforms that are introduced in one country do seem to spread to others in similar forms. It can be that listening to updates from a country one year describing a development from government or society in their own country and finding it repeating in another country a few years later. For example, at the 2009 Health Seminar in Italy one of the speakers described the effects that Pedigree Dogs Exposed, a massively influential **UK** TV programme in 2008 for anyone too young to remember it, had had on the *Italian* dog scene.

We went out of our way when forming to ensure we could not be seen as a threat to any club in any way and, whilst we still occasionally have some misunderstandings raised at the meetings from new people, mostly things are settled down and the BIWG is an accepted body for most parts of the International Bernese world.

More info

The BIWG has a web site on [www. http://berner-iwg.org/](http://berner-iwg.org/) where you can find all sorts of related information about Bernese health issues and the BWIG itself as well as links to member clubs and other sources of BMD health information such as notes from the seminars.

Finally, my thanks to BIWG President Martha Cehrs for checking this article and confirming my recollections.