

IN THE NEWS

Dog genome out of the shadow

The second member of the Venter household to make it into the history books is the black poodle Shadow, whose draft genome was published in *Science* on 26 September 2003.

The draft is very rough — there are millions of gaps in the 2.4-billion-unit genome — but it is good enough to draw certain conclusions about the nature of dogginess (*The New York Times*), and the difference between the 400 or so dog breeds, from St Bernards to pugs (*The Daily Telegraph*).

The DNA blueprint will enhance our understanding of the genes that cause canine disorders and their human counterparts, as well as highlighting the genetic origins of traits such as aggression and loyalty. It will also allow breeders to select dogs with the healthiest genetic profiles (*The Times*).

So, what have we learned from the sequence so far? Although the human sequence is larger than that of the dog, humans share about three-quarters of their genes with dogs, and the two are more similar to one another than either is to the mouse (*The Times*).

Another goal of the project was to see how much could be learned from a small DNA-sequencing effort. Although Venter's team decoded the poodle genome just one-and-a-half times instead of the usual eight or more, the sparse coverage is "surprisingly good" (*The New York Times*).

So, the stage is set for understanding the genes that are involved in determining the way border collies chase around herding sheep and labradors feel compelled to fetch an object (*The Times*).

Meanwhile, researchers at the Whitehead Institute, Massachusetts, are busily decoding the genome — the complete one this time — of another breed, that of a boxer called Tasha (*The New York Times*).

Tanita Casci

IN THE NEWS

UK public reject GM crops

The vast majority of the United Kingdom public are frightened of genetically modified (GM) crops, according to the 'GM Nation?' report presented to the government on 24 September 2003.

Chair of the GM debate, Malcolm Grant, said the overwhelming response to GM was one of "concern and scepticism" (*BBC News*). "The GM debate reflected a weakening in the faith in the ability or even the will of any government to defend the interest of the general public" he said (*Sydney Morning Herald*).

Strangely enough, on the same day that GM crops were taking a battering in the United Kingdom media, there was some good news for GM advocates in Brazil, where Vice President Jose Alencar announced that the ban on transgenic crops was lifted (*The New York Times*).

However, the United Kingdom news just seemed to get worse for supporters of GM crops. Buoyed by the results of the GM debate, an environmental group claimed to have signed up hundreds of people online to a pledge to pull up any future commercial plantings of GM crops (*The Guardian*).

Almost at the same time, Bayer announced their decision to halt United Kingdom trials of GM plants until conditions were "more favourable" (*The Observer*).

So, things are not looking comfortable for the United Kingdom Government and for GM's strongest political advocate, Prime Minister Tony Blair. The 'GM Nation?' report was a blow to his five-year mission to introduce GM agriculture (*The Independent*).

Now that the field trials that originally delayed the GM decision look like providing plenty of ammunition for GM opponents (*The Guardian*), it is hard to see the government pushing through GM crops in the face of an unreceptive public.

Nick Campbell