Recognizing, evaluating and treating abnormalities of the eyelids in Tibetan Mastiffs

There has been a good bit of discussion regarding abnormalities of the eyelids in Tibetan Mastiffs in recent months. Much of this discussion is a natural part of newer breeders becoming educated to conditions that sometimes affect the puppies in their litters. This is not a scientific article and I am writing it as informational for owners and breeders: it is not intended to be a substitute for good veterinary care.

The most common conditions that affect the eyelids of Tibetan Mastiffs are entropion and ectropion. These terms refer to how the eyelids fit over the eye. In the case of entropion, one or both of the eyelids roll in. Ectropion is a rolling out of one or both of the eyelids, but most commonly the lower lid. It is important to note that these conditions can involve only a portion of the lid. These conditions are accepted as genetic, but the mode of inheritance is undetermined. What is known is that the size and shape of the head, the size and set of the eyes and the presence of loose skin all contribute to these conditions.
It is not uncommon for breeders to observe some tearing in the eyes of very young puppies. Sometimes puppies as young as three or four weeks may seem to squint and/or tear. Many things can cause tearing in puppies, but one possible cause would be the fit of the eyelids. Entropion can be harder to notice in young puppies because the eyes are small. In natural light, one should be able to see the eyelid rim on both lids with no rolling or folding in. Most commonly entropion will be observed on the lower lid and in the middle to outer corner of the eye. Ectropion is usually easier to determine in that the conjunctiva (red tissues surrounding the eye) are more obvious than with an unaffected puppy. These conditions may be anywhere from mild to acute.

Recently some Tibetan Mastiff breeders have pursued heavier heads and heads with more loose skin in their breeding programs. These exaggerations predispose the puppies to conditions affecting the fit of the eyelid. All this being said it is very important for people evaluating puppies to take into account the dramatic change that occurs as a Tibetan Mastiff puppy develops. While many puppies may pass through a phase where the eyelids are not a perfect fit, most often this condition is temporary. Canine ophthalmologists refer to the temporary conditions affecting the fit of the eyelids as “spastic” entropion or ectropion. I cannot emphasize strongly enough the importance of using caution in concluding that a puppy has entropion that will require surgery.

In my experience the majority of puppies who present with ill fitting eyelids will simply grow through the condition with little or no intervention. Commercially available artificial tears can help make a puppy more comfortable as its head grows into its eyelids. It is important not to ignore a condition that could result in harm to the puppy's eyes, so I strongly urge the use of the services of a veterinary ophthalmologist if there is genuine concern. Using a specialist is quite important because their experience will not only be invaluable in determining the diagnosis but they are the best resource for planning treatment. For puppies whose eyelids are troubling them and for whom eye drops are not helpful, the ophthalmologist may suggest tacking the lids. This procedure takes just a few minutes and is done with the puppy sedated. Small stitches are used to reposition the lids. There is no surgery and no cutting. The stitches may remain for a few days or a few weeks, but will need to be removed after the puppy has grown a bit. Sometimes a puppy may need to be tacked more than once to allow it time to grow. If the ophthalmologist determines that the puppy will require surgery to correct the fit of the eyelids then you will want to make sure that the puppy has matured sufficiently so that the surgery will give the desired results.

Of course the health and happiness of the puppy is always the first consideration. It is important to note for those people who would like to show their Tibetan Mastiff in conformation events that the AKC specifically disallows dogs with surgically corrected entropion or ectropion to be entered in dog shows. The prohibition does not apply to puppies that have been tacked, so it is important to use restraint in pursuing a surgical remedy.

In summary, the fit of the eyelids in a Tibetan Mastiff is one of many features that require patience. This very slow to mature breed presents special challenges to people who are more familiar with other breeds. Always give the puppy time to develop and seek the advice of a specialist before planning any treatment for the eyes.