

Pet-buyers beware!

You don't need a license to open a pet shop in Japan, a fact that is leading to more and more dodgy set-ups where animals, regarded as mere merchandise, are suffering in the quest for a quick profit

Mainichi Shimbun

Never before have pets been so popular in Japan, or the relationship between pets and their owners more intimate. The simple word "pet" hardly does our canine or feline companions justice any more; they have become "life partners," or — the latest addition to the Japanese-English lexicon — "companion animals." Cashing in on the boom and marring the love-fest are a proliferating breed of unscrupulous or incompetent pet store owners who operate unhindered by any form of government regulation.

Case one: The chinchilla gold cat was suffering aggravated diarrhea. The Osaka pet shop manager who had sold it proposed a deal: "Pay us 10 percent of the purchase price and we'll exchange it for you."

No, said the owner, "This baby is the one I wanted, and I'm not interested in an exchange. It's up to you to pay for her treatment."

"Listen," said the manager. "If we take her to the hospital they'll just put her to sleep" — which, he went on to hint, would probably be the best solution. The negotiations reached an impasse. Ten days later, the cat died.

Case two: A woman ordered a female Labrador retriever from a mail-order pet shop in Nagano Prefecture. The shop replied that they were all sold out of Labrador retrievers, but several days later they sent word that one had just come in; payment in advance, please. The customer asked for a photo, but never received one.

But she did receive the dog — which turned out to be a male, and, worse, to walk with a pronounced limp. The vet diagnosed a congenital hip joint defect. When the woman complained, the mail order house stymied her by denying any knowledge of the transaction.

Case three: A week after purchase, a Himalaya cat developed severe diarrhea and vomiting. The vet diagnosed congenital intestinal inflammation. The Tokyo-area pet shop took the cat to its own vet for a second opinion, which concurred with the first.

The pet shop's vet recommended putting the animal to sleep. The customer was outraged: "How can you be so casual about destroying a life?" The

pet shop owner offered to give the customer a new cat if she agreed to let the first one be disposed of. When she demurred, the owner's manner turned threatening. "What're you, holding out for compensation money, or what?" he demanded. The pet shop's vet subsequently refused to give the cat further treatment.

Pet peeves

Last December the Conference on Problems Concerning Pet Purchases set up a hotline which in two days received 63 calls. Veterinarian Chizuko Yamaguchi of the Japan Animal Welfare Society fielded them. "The trouble is," she says, "there are no laws regulating the industry."

You don't need a license to open a pet shop, a fact which more and more entrepreneurs are using to launch themselves into a new — and newly profitable — business. "Some pet shop owners sell animals they know are sick," Yamaguchi charges. "Some conceal the animals' pedigree. Irresponsibility is rampant."

"Sellers should be aware," she says, "that some sellers don't seem to consider that pets are life entrusted to their care and not just merchandise."

That sense is better developed in Britain, where prospective pet shop owners must submit to a government inspection which probes living environments, feeding arrangements, communicable disease prevention measures and so on. The Conference on Problems Concerning Pet Purchases is appealing to the government to introduce a licensing system for pet shops similar to Britain's.

Many pet shop owners join the conference in advocating a licensing system. "Low-quality pet shops are giving the whole industry a bad name," complains Naoki Mizumura, chairman of the Japan Pet Association. "We need a qualification certification system that will weed out know-nothing vendors."

In the meantime, Mizumura suggests an informal three-point check to help shoppers assess the legitimacy of the pet stores they visit: (1) Does the shop owner check up on the animals once a day? (2) Can he give guidance on how to raise the pet? (3) Does the shop provide aftercare?

If the answer to any of those ques-



The Japan Pet Association urges buyers to help weed out low-quality shops by asking some basic questions before making a purchase.

tions is no — tell the owner you're just looking.

Healing the family

According to Tadao Imoto, head of a study group on human-animal relations, one major cause of the growing number of problems pet owners are running into is a perception gap between vendors and clients. What owners are increasingly inclined to see as an irreplaceable member of the family is to some pet dealers merchandise pure and simple.

The pet owners, in Imoto's view, are closer to the truth.

"People who are concerned about their pets' peace of mind go a long way toward improving their own," he says.

So much so that child therapists sometimes advise the parents of troubled children to invest in a pet.

A case in point is the Zushi, Kanagawa Prefecture, junior-high student who refused to go to school or to have anything to do with his family, spending his days locked in his room playing video games. This went on for three months. The turning point was a decision by the family to buy a puppy. The boy had loved dogs as a child; Yuko Inage, a clinical psychologist and counselor at the Zushi City Children's Consultation Office, thought it might work. Change was apparent almost immediately. A month later the boy addressed his mother for the first time in a long while. "Can I have some milk for the dog?" he said. The dog became a kind of intermediary between the boy and the rest of the family.

"Dogs ease family tensions and give young people a sense of self-reliance," says Inage.

when they turned in a strong performance