



Phoebe's Story

This account of Phoebe, our mini smooth dachshund, does not have a happy ending but gives an account of our thoughts, feelings and emotions as we travelled through the experience of IVDD with her. It is still very raw as we are only a few weeks on from losing her and can't quite believe that she has been and gone and is no longer part of our family life. She may have been small but true to dachshund form, she had bags of personality and her own quirky charm. It's a dachshund thing which you will understand.

Phoebe was only 4 years and 7 months when we made the decision to put her to sleep. She was only 4 when her first disc herniated, an

event that happened suddenly with no prior warning and with devastating immediate effect for her and our family. Experiencing this awful health issue leaves an indelible scar on your mind and heart and has spurred us on to support research into IVDD not only to inform other dachshund owners, but to work towards eradication through informed and responsible breeding into the future. It is the only way.

Another member for the pack

We acquired Phoebe from a KC assured breeder at 8 weeks old. She was tiny. The size of a Sky remote. She could easily fit and run underneath our standard long-haired dachshund who is just a year older than her. Now that is a sight to see. They loved each other from the outset. Beau loves puppies and is very gentle with them accepting that having handsome feathered ears means that a puppy is just going to swing from them. We worried initially that his size and weight could easily crush her if play got out of hand, but it never was an issue. In fact the shoe was on the other paw as Phoebe's best manoeuvre was to sidle up alongside Beau and kick seven bells out of him when she wanted to play. In fact, looking back, she was the alpha of the pack, although I wouldn't admit that to her face. She had us all running around, family life did start and end with her. If she was happy, we all were. It still amazes me that, without any words, the pack can tell you what they want or don't want to do. That nudge on your leg to tell you I would like you to feed me now. Those eyes which tell you I really have been super good and could just do with a little treat, or in Phoebe's case "I'm really not that keen on going for a walk right now, how about you go and I'll wait at home for you?"

Her most endearing skill was her 'fidget' behaviour when she really knew she had to go into the garden last thing at night but that would mean losing her cosy, warm seat. When you went to pick her up to put her out, she would roll on her back for a tummy tickle. It was a pure distraction as you



can't resist a dachshund tummy and it's impossible to pick her up like that. Clever girl!

She liked her pack and only her pack and was very protective of us. Just the immediate family. Unless you were a blood relation you got short shrift from her. Any visitors were put in their place. She would bark at them on arrival, departure, if they moved, or heavens forbid laughed and were reminded of her presence as she 'grumped' at them at regular intervals from behind the cushions. Her favourite sleeping spot.

We felt that we did all the right things to keep her healthy. We kept a watch on her weight as she could easily gain it. She had lovely walks every day as we live by the coast and are spoilt for choice. We never let the dogs go up and down stairs. She slept in her crate at night out of choice. (This turned out to be a real blessing for her initial recovery) and we have rugs under our (low) settees to prevent them slipping on the wooden floor when she jumped down. We were told by the specialist that none of this really mattered when the chips were down as the genetic weakness was always there, right from the start and even if she had been wrapped in cotton wool in her crate all her life, it still would have happened. Bizarrely, this was a crumb of comfort as human nature is always looking for a reason why and it's all too easy to think I shouldn't have let her do this, or I shouldn't have done that. With IVDD, it's there regardless. If present, it lurks in that gene segment responsible for dwarfism. That gene that gives the dachshund that appealing size and shape. Reading the Dachshund Breed Council health pages really explains all of this and helps to lessen the feeling of failing her.

The day IVDD entered our lives

Whether it is a coincidence or perhaps a warning signal with Phoebe, she had colitis. I used to call it irritable bowel disease (IBD). This occurred the day before her disc ruptured. She did tend to suffer with a sensitive tummy. You would know she was suffering with it as she wouldn't eat her breakfast. A dachshund not wanting to eat is a sure signal something's not right. You would sit beside her on the settee and hear her stomach gurgling and churning. She looked uncomfortable. It took me a while to figure out what was going on. I've still got 'L' plates on when it comes to dog communication. However, I got there in the end and we put her on daily doggy probiotics which really made a huge difference and kept it at bay most of the time. This time she hadn't improved by the next day and was clearly still uncomfortable, hiding behind the settee cushions and crying so we took her to the vets. Phoebe was a nervous soul and ever since being spayed, hated the whole vet experience. She would shake like a leaf which made it difficult for the vet to really feel what was going on. However, when a dachshund has stomach or back ache, they tense up their stomach and hunch the back. She was given a painkilling injection to settle her and a plan to return for blood tests the next day if she hadn't improved. The vet said as we were going, 'with dachshunds it's either their stomachs or their backs'. We never thought anymore about it at the time but how ominous those words were. I still can hear them now.

As is the case with our animal menagerie over the years who have been to the vets, returning home and getting away from such a terrifying place makes them feel instantly better. Having had a strong painkiller, Phoebe was no different and after an hour or so went storming up the garden to bark at the next door neighbour as he went up his own drive and shut his own front door. Again, it's a dachshund thing isn't it? However, as the afternoon wore on and the painkiller began to wear off she became increasingly more unsteady on her back legs. Initially, I thought it was just the effect of the drug but her back right leg began to drag and within an hour from running up the garden she couldn't move her back legs at all. It was so quick. No warning. One minute she was fine, the next she was paralysed. That was the disc. It had herniated. We rushed her back to the vets. Time is of the essence. The longer it is left the more possibility for permanent damage. We got in just before surgery closing and were referred instantly to a specialist spinal hospital an hour and a half away and told to go straight there. This is the downside of living in a rural location, nothing is on the doorstep.

The specialist was knowledgeable, experienced and had seen it all before. It was bread and butter surgery and care to him. To all of us it was terrifying. He felt certain from her symptoms that the rupture was the most common one, namely T12 at the lower end of her thoracic spine and top of her lumbar or lower back region. Once they know you have insurance it is a foregone decision to

go ahead with surgery. Unfortunately, they couldn't operate that evening as I'd fed her just before the disc ruptured to try and settle her IBD. He considered it more of a risk to operate when she had been fed, than to sedate her and leave her surgery until the next day. We signed the consent forms and left empty-hearted with her collar. For Phoebe, there can't have been anything worse than to be without us, in a strange place, in pain and being unable to walk. It was a lonely journey back home that evening.

The operation and first month afterwards

Waiting for news makes the day seem a very long one. She was finally operated on mid-afternoon, the CT scan confirming the rupture where the specialist predicted. You place your most precious possession entirely in their care and trust that they will perform a miracle. You hope they look after her as you do and comfort her as you would if you could be there. You live for the daily phone call between 8-9 am to tell you her progress. You hang onto every word. Phoebe wouldn't eat or drink; she still had bad colitis and needs special care and tempting with tuna when she is like that. These are home remedies, not routinely thought of or available in an animal hospital. She had to have a drip put in, which she pulled out and a catheter as she wasn't passing urine. You try to block out those images and the thoughts that she must be frightened, feel alone and wondering where her pack went and what she did to end up there. Who knows what they think?

After 4 days we were informed we could collect her. No prior warning, however we had started to gather post-operative bits and pieces. We rearranged the lounge so that the crate was set up in the middle of the floor. This way she could be safe but still be an integral part of the pack and see us at all times. She actually loved this arrangement, especially her new bedding of cot sized duvets rolled up into a sort of chaise-long style. It was super soft but had a lovely raised pillow bit so she looked like a princess in her boudoir.

The look of sheer delight on her face when she realised we had come for her was overwhelming. They brought her out in a sort of diaper harness to show us how to walk her with assistance. She hated those pants and looked so dejected and then realised we were there and cried to be lifted up to kiss and cuddle us. We were given Gabapentin and Metacam tablets for pain relief and shown how to carry out Physio exercises.

Life in a crate

You are so frightened of hurting her back. She had a shaved strip of fur all down the centre of her back and about 6 stitches. Between us we learnt how to lift her in and out of the crate, so she felt supported and comfortable, keeping her back straight. You spend a lot of times on your knees. We used a scarf gently looped around her back end to help walk her. She hated those pants. A scarf gave you just enough length and control and a bit of privacy for her when she needed to toilet. Dachshunds are quite proud that way. We fed her by hand on tuna to start with to tempt her appetite and to hide her tablets so she would take them. She was really patient with us and sat still after being lifted out of the crate so we could get the scarf in place to use as a sling. We worked out a toileting routine, always after her meals and every couple of hours in between. We had very few accidents. Initially, it took her 36 hours to wee and I phoned up the vet hospital in a panic to seek advice but she hadn't been drinking much and I guess she was unsure of how to manage this new situation. She loved the crate and returning to it after a quick toilet session. We always plumped it up and made it cosy and inviting. She slept a lot but I think that was probably the tablets.

When she first returned she really growled at Beau, warning him away. He is a gentle and intelligent soul and seemed to understand that she was sore and needed space and so he respected that. It was good for him to see she had returned and was still part of the pack. I kept a daily diary of her progress. You tend to find that after such an emotional upheaval you can't think straight and can't remember when she last passed urine etc. My old nursing habits die hard, I guess. My husband slept downstairs on the bed chair with her at night for the first 2 weeks. As long as she could see us, she happily went back to sleep. Crate rest is strict and essential for 4 weeks. I

imagined it would be really hard to keep her happy and entertained in there, but she was a model patient and loved it in that boudoir. How you would manage this if you worked I don't know. We operated like a tag team, one going out and about doing the essentials whilst the other stayed on nursing duty. You do tend to go stir crazy but we were fortunate that it was summertime and a lovely really warm one at that.

One of my fondest memories of this time was the look of peace and contentment on her face when I used to carry her out into the garden. She hated being shut up in the hospital. She loved sunshine and was a sun worshipper. She so appreciated being taken into the garden and would look skyward to watch the birds and watch the trees in the breeze. As time went on, I would put a rug down and Beau, Phoebe and I would sit peacefully enjoying the fresh air and quiet for 20 minutes or so once she had done her business. She would return to the crate totally relaxed and happily snooze for another couple of hours when it was time to toilet her again.

Watching for signs of improvement

Keeping a diary helped to record her progress. 48 hours after her discharge we began to see slight movement in her left leg. This was the unaffected one. The right leg was affected by the ruptured disc pressing on the nerve on this side, so remained paralysed. You never know how much mobility will return. It's a guessing game and we were warned of this. You have good days and bad, some days progressing and then the next she seemed to go back again, appearing to be really sleepy. You look for little signs of hope. She licked her left leg today so she must have some feeling in it. By day 4 post op we were all getting into our stride of when to toilet her with good effect, handling her comfortably, getting her to eat and her right leg seemed to be getting stronger. She started to 'place' it correctly. By day 5 she was walking quite well in her sling. We found that we would lift her to a spot in the lawn where she preferred to toilet and then let her choose her spot, by walking a little in the sling. Dachshunds take ages to find the perfect spot. It has to be just right.

By day 7 she was definitely moving her right leg and on one of our garden rug sessions rolled onto her back because the sun and grass just felt so good. It scared me to death as I wasn't sure how to get her the right way round to place her back in the sling. Beau would sniff her back gently. He could tell that was the source of her pain.

Day 10 was a trip back to the local vet for her sutures to be removed. They had healed beautifully. By now she could push up from lying and stand on all 4 paws.

By day 14, with sling assistance, she was able to walk very gently over the pebbled area of our garden. By three weeks, she was managing to climb in and out of the back door with assistance. She heard a noise in the garden and went off at a pace to bark without the sling. She was so fast and strong it terrified me as I wasn't expecting it.

By week four, she was walking independently inside the house. At times, she would appear stiff so I would gently try to massage her leg and back or carry out the Physio exercises. By now, I could leave her a little while to walk Beau. She was happy in her crate and, provided she had recently been out, I knew I could safely manage half an hour or so.

By now, she had a month of crate rest and had enough. She wanted out. We had started to feed her alongside Beau again. She was walking perfectly in the house and with minimal assistance, could negotiate getting out the back door and walk independently around the garden. She even began to greet me at the lounge door when I came down in the morning. Just like old times! She was discharged from the care of the specialists. We asked to see her scans and asked if they could see any more weaknesses. How they manage to carry out such delicate work is unbelievable. I always feel I would rather trust my health to a vet than a medic. I know because I used to help train the latter!

The legacy of surgery

It's like with your own children, you can't help but worry about them. She had a slight limp but that was fine. It became more pronounced in an evening or if she had walked a little too much so we slowed the pace and rested her. She could no longer jump up onto the settee for which I was really grateful. However, she preferred to be up there, sitting with me, mostly behind a cushion. She could and would jump down though at the slightest noise so you had to remember to lift her down first rather than jump up to answer the phone or the door. We bought some lovely soft dog cushions to overcome that one and they moved with her, whichever seat she was in so she had a 'crash mat', softer landing. She loved how soft they felt and delighted in rolling around on them. They also provided a safe, soft floor-level bed for when I went out, as she preferred not to go back into the crate. You are forever watching for progress or, alternatively, signs of deterioration. Her rehabilitation was gradual. A little bit further for a walk each day. She was better on flat terrain, so we rarely went to our beloved sand dunes. Walks became shorter; half an hour maximum. We aimed for daily ones but it was a day by day judgement call. Beau was the one who really missed out in all of this but he accepted it all. We accepted that perhaps our big country walks and choice of holiday venues had irreversibly changed. We accepted and adapted, but the worry is always there in the back of your mind. I was told by another sympathetic, passing, dachshund owner who had been all through it with her 12 year old dog, if it didn't reoccur in the first 12 months, it was unlikely to happen again. I clung onto that. That was my aim for Phoebe. We were a team working towards that. I believed in that. We said right from the start we couldn't and wouldn't put her through the trauma again. She was nervous to start with and it did affect and change her. She wouldn't tolerate any other neighbourhood dog coming remotely near her, or people. Im guessing she felt vulnerable. I'm guessing she had some numbness in her leg, hence the limp. In her eyes, she could no longer flee from danger. But she loved us even more, if that's possible to measure and you felt she trusted us so much, as we had helped her in her time of need.

The day it returned

I find it hard to write this section. It's still so raw, so shocking and so wrong for such a young dog. Rob went downstairs to a Phoebe that wasn't happy when she came out of her crate. She wouldn't eat and went out into the garden, running along the hedge looking for somewhere to hide. She kept trying to wee but couldn't. She wouldn't eat. She looked a bit wobbly. She perked up when I came down and greeted me. She always did. We tried the IBD route with a bit of tuna hiding a Buscopan in it. This, as we had learnt by now, sorted her out within 20 minutes if it was IBD. If it didn't, then it was her back. It didn't work and that awful sinking, desperation creeps in. The absolute worst was happening again in front of our eyes. She was shivering with pain. She just lay beside me not moving, looking up at me. She couldn't use her back legs. She couldn't wee. We suspected it was another disc, lower down this time. She was in pain, she was paralysed. How many more times would this happen? What residual effects would she have to deal with?

We took her straight to the vet, knowing we couldn't put her through it again. It wasn't right for her. They initially asked us to try Gabapentin again and this time she came back in our arms. She deteriorated over the next two hours. The vets was closed by now as it was a Saturday afternoon. They couldn't come out to us until the next day, although the partner branch some 20 miles away was on duty with minimal vet cover.

How hard it is having to make that final decision. How you wish you weren't an adult. How you wish someone else would make it for you or you could run away. But you love them. They trust you implicitly. They rely on you. The pack doesn't desert its own.

We made that final journey to a place and people none of us knew. We told them what we were coming for and those strangers look after you and treat you with care and compassion. They understand it's not a decision taken lightly. I felt Phoebe knew. For once she was really calm. I felt that she was looking to us to stop her pain.

She gently put her head down on her paws, Sphinx-like, and drifted off to sleep as we stroked and talked to her for the final time.

How hard it is to see her perfect little shape and glossy coat and leave her; to walk out of the room with her collar in your hand and a broken heart. You can't believe it has come to this for such a young dog. You can't believe she has been and gone. We were just getting to know our pack. We had many more adventures planned. The emptiness that follows is so hard. We all deal with these things differently. Then there was Beau. I'm not sure how they read or understand these things but he is different too now. We are slowly trying to find a new pattern and way of doing things. How hard it is that first morning after, to come downstairs, or to see her collar, or food bowl, or her favourite toys. Going on certain walks for the first time too are a constant reminder that she has gone. Dog owners understand these things and they offer lovely words of comfort which are so needed in the early days

Stop, Paws and Think

I'm no expert to advise you if you are going through a similar experience with your beautiful dachshund right now. I can only offer you my heartfelt sympathy. Only you know in your heart of hearts what is right for you and your pet. Through my story, I have tried to offer an insight and put into words my feelings and dilemmas from my experience. It may help you in your decision making process. As my husband says, Phoebe's life was short and sweet, just like her. If you are thinking of becoming an owner I hope it makes you stop, 'paws' (pun very much intended) and think as we have a responsibility to this lovely breed and I feel I want to put something back for having the albeit brief time, of living with such a beautiful little soul. Perhaps this is the lesson that Phoebe was trying to teach me. It depends on your view of the universe and how it works.

The Dachshund Breed Council have the right idea. There is a potential solution to very much reduce this health issue, perhaps in time to eradicate it. They need your support to provide the data for research to show as evidence to The Kennel Club, to breeders, to owners and to vets so that things can change in the future. The more data they have on the incidence of IVDD and the outcome, the more weight they have to bring about change. Please look at their website, read up on what is known and see if the experience you are going through can help other owners and dogs in the future.

As an owner, the key difference for me would be to ask the breeders if the parents have been screened for IVDD and to find out what that score is. It's that simple. The more we as potential owners demand this, the more things will have to change. This is how the Breed Council influenced PRA testing, which is now a requirement for 'assured breeding' status for the mini breed. As of yet, that status does not include the risk of passing on this potentially crippling, painful, even life-threatening condition onto those pups, that we are willing to pay a premium for, from an assured breeder.

As an owner, believe me, you wouldn't wish this on your dog and as a breeder, surely if you truly, truly have the welfare of the breed at heart and not the cash incentive, you wouldn't wish to perpetuate this problem on that litter of puppies, nor the emotional heartbreak on those people coming through your door to choose one. In the meantime, that unseen genetic weakness carries on from generation to generation as we continue to fall in love and acquire these delightful dogs. One in four currently end up with some sort of back problem, not all of those will have a positive ending.

The bittersweet story for Phoebe continues as my best friend has her sister and her half brother. Her feeling of fear and dread is tangible now. That outcome remains unknown. Stop. Paws and think.

Phoebe, in the colder months, used to wear a lovely pink fleece and she reminded us very much of that dear little character Piglet, the very best friend of Winnie the Pooh, created by AA Milne.

We called her our 'flying piglet' as she raced and flew through the sand dunes, back in her healthy days. The final words and image that sum up my emotions right now, go to that very clever bear.

goodbye..?
oh no, please. Can't
we go back to page one
and do it all over
again?

-Winnie The Pooh

