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## **Dealing with Cancer in Our Pets**

- by Chris Taylor DVM

I hate this disease. Cancer always seems to take us by surprise. By that, I mean that it seems to get diagnosed right in the middle of treating some other less serious condition; cats that come in for with bad teeth actually have oral tumours, a dog with an infected wound that turns out to be a mast cell tumour, behaviour problems related to brain tumours, broken legs that are due to bone cancer, vision loss because of leukemia. The list is near endless and can sometimes be depressing. But there is a brighter side.

Part of the reason we see so much cancer now is that our pets are living much longer lives. This due in most part to leash laws, vaccination, diet, and better dental care for our pets. This gives cancer a better chance of appearing, because face it - you've got to die of something! If we eliminated all the leading causes of death, we'd live forever. Maybe that sounds good to you, but I'm not so sure. What I do find difficult is those lives that seem to be getting cut unduly short. As we gain insight on cancer we are learning better ways of treating and even preventing it. Some of the information filters down to veterinarians from our colleagues in the human medical field, but much of it comes from active veterinary cancer research.

Often people think that they will need to euthanize pets with cancer, but this is not always necessary. Sometimes we can treat the cancer with surgery, chemotherapy or in some cases radiation therapy much like in people. Surgery most people understand, and it has its place in treatment plans. Shadow is a golden retriever I know who recently was diagnosed with bone cancer. His guardians decided to have his leg amputated with hope that it might cure him, but mainly to relieve him of pain. Now two weeks later, he is feeling great. He's off all his pain medication, and is hopping around like any furry, cookie munching tripod you ever met.

The next consideration for Shadow's people is whether they want to pursue chemotherapy. Some people are adverse to using chemotherapy in pets, but the truth is it doesn't need to be the horrible ordeal that they imagine. Some types of chemo are as simple as oral aspirin-type drugs with few side affects. Other types involve weekly intravenous injections of the most modern of anti-cancer drugs available. Its true that they sometimes cause brief nausea but rarely hair loss or other problems we cannot control. We know that complete cure of Shadow's cancer is unlikely, but then he might get as much as two years of high quality life and love as a result. Maybe that doesn't sound like much to you, but consider for Shadow, that's like fourteen years to him!

For some types of cancer, radiation therapy is the best known treatment. The problem with it is generally is availability, as the machines used are mainly those no longer serviceable for human use. There exist very few places in Canada for this type of treatment. This may change as human radiation therapy machinery is gradually switched over to newer technology equipment.

Sometimes our friends and relatives not understanding the bond of love we share with our pets believe that we are wasting our money, suggesting it could be spent on starving children or other more worthwhile causes. Funny, I rarely hear those same people saying they will buy a smaller car or cheaper stereo, so that they can make such a selfless donation! Its always easier to tell other people how to spend their money, but when it comes to the ones we love we usually want the best can afford to give. Whether to treat cancer in our pets, or not, is a very personal decision that must be made based on knowledge and compassion and economics. Regardless, we must never feel guilty about love being the motivation to treat, lest we start to forget what it is to be human.