

A Rough Diagnosis

Written by Janet Goodman, BT Contributor
May 2019

Hearing the “C” word is hard for dog owners



It's awful hearing a cancer diagnosis. Like most Americans, I've been through it with acquaintances, clients, friends, and members of my own family. No matter how many times I've experienced their grim news, it's never easy to take.

The emotions run all over the place when you find out. There's shock, sadness, guilt, anger, fear, hope, worry, a foggy uncertainty about the future, followed by a clear certainty of what's to come. These were the things I felt when I recently learned that my dog Bo could have hemangiosarcoma (HSA), a malignant form of cancer.

I say *could have* because for several days there wasn't a definitive diagnosis of the disease from a biopsy. The first signs of something wrong came on a Tuesday afternoon in March, when Bo lay down when I let him outside. That in itself was unusual, but he was reluctant to get up, and something told me to check the color of his gums. Sure enough, they were white, an indication of either anemia or internal bleeding, of which I suspected the latter.

I rushed him to my local veterinarian, who took a set of X-rays of his chest and abdomen, as well as blood samples. Tests showed he was anemic and had an irregular heartbeat. X-rays revealed what appeared to be fluid in the abdomen. As it was late in the workday, the vet suggested I take him to an emergency animal hospital for further treatment.

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Later in the emergency room, the attending vet thought Bo could have a bleeding tumor, but as the dog's numbers had begun to stabilize, they wanted to take better X-rays, ultrasound, and more blood tests to re-evaluate him the next day. Of course, I agreed. On Wednesday, a surgeon removed both his spleen, which had a one-and-a-half-inch mass, and a lobe of his liver, which contained a ruptured tumor -- the source of the abdominal bleeding. This vet saw additional masses in the liver, as well.

Hemangiosarcoma develops in blood vessel cells and quickly spreads to other areas of the body, most commonly the spleen, liver, lungs, heart, and skin. According to the American College of Veterinary Internal Medicine (ACVIM), this type of aggressive malignant cancer is seen mostly in middle-age and geriatric dogs, and only rarely in other species of animals. Golden retrievers, Labrador retrievers, and German shepherds are more commonly afflicted with hemangiosarcoma than other breeds. Bo was an 11-year old blue heeler mix.

The emergency animal hospital vets explained to me that there are usually no symptoms of this disease until the tumors have spread. Blood from the tumors can seep and accumulate in the abdominal cavity, causing anemia, pressure on the organs, and often collapse.

"Hemangiosarcoma of the spleen or liver is the most common tumor to cause hemorrhage in the abdomen," writes veterinarian Wallace Morrison in *Cancer in Dogs and Cats*.

The ACVIM notes on its online "Hemangiosarcoma Fact Sheet" that diagnosis is only achieved through a biopsy examined by a pathologist, and that there is no foolproof blood test for the disease. Surgery is the best treatment of HSA. Life expectancy of those positively diagnosed and who had surgery to remove tumors (except for those with skin tumors) is a few months at best, depending which organ is affected. Chemotherapy can extend life expectancy by only weeks or months. HSA of the skin has the best chance of being cured.

After Bo was sewn up and in recovery, I got the surgeon's call and the probable diagnosis of malignant, metastatic cancer. It would be Saturday when I would get the histopathology biopsy report from a veterinary pathologist in College Station, Texas, with the confirmation: *Microscopic Findings: All Nodules: Metastatic hemangiosarcoma*. Unfortunately, I was handed the pathologist report minutes after Bo was euthanized.

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No professional that week had ever counseled to euthanize. At first, I had clung to the hope that maybe it was only a benign bleeding tumor in his spleen, which is what happened to a dog I owned several years earlier. She, too, was 11 years old and had lived an additional six years after her splenectomy. This was one reason I opted for surgery for Bo.

In the end, Bo had a good 36 hours at home after surgery. He was rushed back to the same emergency vet hospital for euthanasia on St. Patrick's Day night, after he suffered what appeared to be a seizure or a stroke.

A diagnostic blood test for HSA is currently being developed, according to the ACVIM. This blood screening will save dogs and their brokenhearted humans from unnecessary surgery to diagnose a disease that quickly spreads and is most often incurable.

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