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In my opinion, the 4 most dangerous words in veterinary medicine

are, **“let’s just watch it.”**



Cartman – a rescued cat with tremendous personality (and appetite). Is the lesion on his nose worrisome?

Why these 4 words you ask? Well they are too commonly heard by pet owners when a lump or bump is identified and brought to the attention of their veterinarian. Years of experiencing pet dogs and cats visiting me in the exam room with concerned owners in tow (*visiting the veterinary oncologist for the first time gets a lot of owners worked up – I get it*), has revealed some common themes. In taking the patient’s history, more often than you’d like to hear, owners

would report:

“my veterinarian said,

- “let’s just watch it...”
- “it didn’t look malignant”
- “it felt like a benign fatty tumor”
- “it’s probably just a cyst”
- “if it is cancer there’s nothing we can do” ([see my post about this myth](#))

When a dog or cat is suspected of having cancer, the most important step is quickly making the diagnosis. The problem with advice like “just watch it” is that you may watch it grow from a mass that is easily treatable into a mass

that is difficult, if not impossible, to treat. You may also watch it spread into the local lymph nodes and throughout the body. Likewise, it is impossible to determine the type of cancer a dog or cat has by simply looking or feeling the mass, or to determine if it is a benign or malignant process. (*At least my eyesight isn’t that good, nor my sense of touch that refined*)



Is this lesion due to cancer, electrical cord burn, chemical burn, or reaction to a spider bite?

***An examination of cells from the tumor under the microscope is required to make the diagnosis. That can be in the form of a biopsy or aspiration cytology.***

Once the diagnosis is made, we then know what staging tests are necessary, we can start discussing treatment options, and begin formulating the prognosis the patient with and without treatment. Generally, my preference is to start with the least invasive diagnostic methods and move towards more invasive methods as needed.

For my veterinary colleagues that may have given such advice in the past, consider how changing your attitude and getting that fine needle aspirate or biopsy sample can positively impact your practice:

- It allows motivated owners the opportunity to pursue cancer treatment while the tumor is manageable
- It helps build trust with your clients because you are providing high-quality medicine, and enabling information-based decision-making
- Your practice is a business after all, and this is a revenue stream

In fairness, most veterinarians I've worked with through the years do offer their clients. However they often face resistance from clients about pursuing the recommended diagnostics. This is evident when the client says they were told to watch it, and the medical record has evidence that diagnostics were recommended and declined. The root cause of this resistance may take several forms:

- Denial – my cat or dog is too (young, healthy, mean, etc.) to get cancer
- Fear – what will I do if it is cancer? ([see my post on what to do!](#))
- Financial – what if the tests find cancer, can I afford treatment?

As veterinarians, we can remind owners that any age or breed (or temperament) dog and cat can get cancer. If they seem worried about the “what if” scenarios, we can remind them that they will be relieved if the tests do not show cancer, and can start making decisions about how to proceed if cancer is discovered. Also, I think it's fair to remind pet owners that if they decline our recommendations, and elect to go home and watch it, they can watch the tumor grow to unmanageable size and watch it spread to local lymph nodes and beyond.