

Thoughts on Cancer Treatment

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For some reason treating cancer brings so much more emotional baggage into my consult room than other equally serious diseases. Take heart failure – its routinely fatal, treatment can make huge differences to a patient's quality of life, but eventually the disease will become resistant to the treatment and euthanasia will be necessary. In my experience most people don't agonise over whether it is right to improve their life when we're not curing the heart disease. We just focus on the patient and do what is right to make them feel better for as long as we can. Now take cancer. Even though the basics are identical to the heart failure example above the decision never seems as 'obvious'. Why? All I can think of is that people are AFRAID to deal with cancer. We shouldn't be. We should focus on the patient, work out the best way to improve quality of life and do it. If that isn't effective, or stops working with no other good options, then euthanasia is the humane decision. Don't let YOUR fears of cancer interfere with looking after the quality of life of your dog or cat. Generally, the most effective way to control the pain or suffering caused by a disease is to control the cause. The most effective ways to do this for cancer are often combinations of surgery, radiation and medical therapy.

Surgery

Rule number 1. The highest chance of cure is with the first surgery. Specialist surgeons have a higher cure rate for complex surgeries than general practitioners. If the lump is big or doesn't seem a routine procedure, then get a referral.

Rule number 2. Removing half the tumour is usually of no benefit to the patient. There are exceptions but basically the part of the tumour causing pain is usually at the edges, not in the middle. Making it look smaller is most often a cosmetic procedure and helps you, not your pet. So, the surgery should be aggressive enough to make a difference, or shouldn't be done.

Rule number 3. Dogs and cats don't feel sorry for themselves after surgery. Base your decision about surgery on what THEIR quality of life will be, not on whether the surgery makes you feel squeamish.

Radiation therapy

Pets tolerate this type of treatment really well. Some will have mild sun-burn type reactions and occasionally there can be problems a year or more down the track, but for the most part it can be really useful to improve on what surgery couldn't remove. It is frequent, so be ready for lots of visits usually with a brief anaesthetic.

Medical treatment

Any drug used for any cancer by definition is chemotherapy. There are tens of different classes of medication, each with many individual drugs, so you can't generalise about 'what' chemotherapy 'is'. Many traditional chemotherapy drugs are natural compounds (from plants usually) or derived from them. The number one concern of pet owners understandably is the risk of side effects. The majority of pets who have therapy administered by an specialist oncologist have NO side effects. There are risks and it is important you discuss these with the oncologist. In most cases the intention is to improve quality of life which means the dose will be set at a level KNOWN to avoid side effects in most dogs and cats.

Alternative treatment

A drug that has no proven benefit and no knowledge of what its risk is for side effects, we call alternative. Use at your peril. EVERY treatment whether natural or synthetic carries risks; wasting time on something ineffective can be a risk in itself.