



Kirby, adopted by Russell and Dana Laggan of Redford, Mich.

# The "C" Word

By Jim Bader, DVM

**T**he word cancer strikes fear into the heart of all Greyhound owners. It seems every Greyhound owner has been touched by cancer, either through his own dog or that of a friend. How is cancer diagnosed? As a veterinarian, how do I approach an owner after diagnosing his Greyhound with cancer?

The word cancer is derived from the ancient Greek and Latin. Cancer is described as far back as the 5th century BC, and mummies with cancers of the bones or soft tissues have been unearthed. The word cancer actually means "crab" in Latin. The crab is a metaphor for the central tumor with the radiating veins, which resemble the crab's legs and claws. The ancients recognized cancer's ability to spread throughout the body, as well as their inability to treat it. The ancients also recognized that some treatments were worse than the disease, actually causing more suffering than the disease itself. Cancer became so feared that people would not tell friends of their diagnosis, and they would hide from the public for fear of being scorned. The concept of cancer as a reason for ostracism persevered until the late 20th century, which saw the advent of better diagnostics, chemotherapeutics, radiation, and improved surgery skills. We know now that cancer is a treatable and beatable disease on many fronts, and need not be feared.

Diagnosing cancer can be very simple or very complex. The simplest diagnosis is made if the actual tumor is visible or obvious. The veterinarian can perform a fine needle aspirate on a tumor and examine it under a microscope in a matter of minutes. Another way to diagnose cancer is with a biopsy of the lesion. A small piece of the tumor is removed and preserved in formalin for a pathologist to examine. The amount of tissue removed depends on the area. With a skin tumor, for example, the veterinarian may remove the entire tumor. The goal of the subsequent examination is to determine if the entire tumor has been removed. In the case of a tumor on an organ, just a piece may be removed and sent to a pathologist. All tumors that are removed should be sent to a pathologist for evaluation; if it is important enough to remove, it is important enough to be evaluated.

The most difficult tumor to locate is the tumor that causes a paraneoplastic syndrome, a condition in which the tumor produces a hormone-like substance that disturbs the balance and health of the patient. The most common paraneoplastic syndrome is ele-



Emmett, adopted by Amy Wanken of Columbus, Ohio.

ated blood calcium from lymphoma. The lymphoma produces a hormone that the body recognizes as parathyroid hormone, which regulates blood calcium. Symptoms include lethargy, weight loss, and usually increased water intake and urination. The elevated blood calcium is evident through bloodwork. Then the search is on, because there are several causes of elevated blood calcium, including lymphoma, anal gland tumor, kidney disease, and blastomycosis (a fungal infection). Further diagnostic tests are warranted to isolate the cause and source of the problem.

After diagnosis, the veterinarian must stage the patient. Staging consists of a total evaluation of the Greyhound, including examination of laboratory data and radiographs. The veterinarian and owner should then discuss the treatment plan, reasonable goals, and possible side effects. This discussion is critical. I want clients to be educated, informed, and prepared to do what they feel is best for their Greyhound.

Diagnosing cancer in a patient is usually a straightforward procedure. What is not simple is telling the Greyhound's owner. As a veterinarian

and a pet owner, I know what it is like to be on both sides of the exam table. It is difficult to tell a client, and it is difficult to hear the message.

When I diagnose a patient with cancer, I feel there is no way to sugarcoat the diagnosis. I present the message in the most direct way possible. My next step is to answer any questions the owner may have. He usually does not have many questions at first, because the news is such a shock. I describe how the disease will progress and what can be done to bring about a cure or remission. I immediately refer some cases to a specialist, if the owner is receptive. The most important step in this process is to schedule an appointment for one to two days from the first visit, to give the owner time to absorb the news and collect his questions. At the next visit, we discuss the owner's questions and come to a conclusion about a treatment plan. As a veterinarian, I can only inform the owner of the various ways to treat the cancer. I cannot make the decision about treatment. Every owner has the right to do what he feels is best for his Greyhound. This may even mean no treatment at all. I tell the client a treat-

ment plan can change; if at any time the Greyhound is not benefiting from the treatment, I respect the owner's decision to discontinue it.

As a pet owner, I have had several animals diagnosed with cancer. The tightness I feel in my stomach as I review and interpret my pet's laboratory results or radiographs is excruciating. The emptiness that comes with having to tell my wife and children rips at my heart. My mind is racing: *Did I miss something? Am I right? How did I not see it earlier?* I know the facts about treatment and hope my Greyhound will be the exception to the rule and be cured, but as a veterinarian, I have to acknowledge reality. The pet owner side of me always has hope; the veterinarian side faces the facts. The owner side also cautions the veterinarian side from doing too much, and I am reminded that the first rule is to do no harm.

We know cancer can be devastating. This is why some owners do not have their Greyhounds checked immediately after suspecting a problem. (Owners often treat themselves the same way.) Facing the reality of the situation is not easy. But early detection offers the best chance for a cure.

Here is an example. I examined a Greyhound named Moe on a Monday morning. His owners had noticed a small mass on his ribs on Friday, and the mass had doubled in size over the weekend. I performed a fine needle aspirate, diagnosed a sarcoma on a rib, and referred him to a specialist for surgery to resect the rib. He had surgery on Tuesday, came home on Friday, and has been disease-free for three years. Another example of successful early detection involved Fire, who underwent surgery to remove a Grade II mast cell tumor ("Lumps and Bumps—Friend or Foe?" Spring 2003 CG). Fire has also been disease-free for three years.

If your Greyhound receives a diagnosis of cancer, ask as many questions as possible. Some cancers can be beaten with early detection and appropriate treatment. For the cancers that we cannot defeat, be your Greyhound's best friend when you decide on a course of treatment. ■

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Dr. Jim Bader is a CG regular contributor.

#### References:

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