



Cancer and Chemotherapy

When pet owners are confronted with a diagnosis of cancer in their pets there is almost invariably a feeling of pessimism and impending doom. This definitely need not be the case. Many of the cancers we see in our patients are curable or manageable with surgery, chemotherapy, radiation or a combination of these treatments.

It is important to realise that cancer is not a single disease entity. There are many different types of cancer and we know what the best treatment options are for most of the cancers we see in our patients.

Chemotherapy is a treatment modality that is becoming more frequently used in recent times. There are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, one of the most common cancers we see in pets is a disease called Malignant Lymphoma. Chemotherapy is the best treatment option for dealing with this disease.

When first confronted with chemotherapy as a treatment option for their pet most owners are very reticent about subjecting their pet to it. This is understandable, as most of us know someone who has been through chemotherapy or watched the process on one of the medical reality shows that we see on television.

When discussing chemotherapy with our pet owners the first thing we emphasise is that the approach to chemotherapy in pets is very different to the approach in people.

In humans, the aim of chemotherapy in patients with lymphoma is to cure them of their disease. So when confronted with say a 20 year old person, it is considered quite reasonable to put them through a process that will almost certainly making them feel very ill for one or two years if the out come is cure and a normal life expectancy (ie. 50 or more years, the chance to get married, have children, watch them grow up and have children).

Clearly, this approach is untenable in our patients. As a result, chemotherapy protocols have been developed that do not make the patient very sick, yet can still provide very good survival times and sometimes cure them of their lymphoma.

The vast majority of our dogs that we treat for lymphoma do not get sick at all. We give them anti-nausea drugs to prevent nausea and vomiting. Their hair does not fall out, and they lead normal lives apart from regular trips to the vet to have their treatment.

The average survival time for a dog diagnosed with lymphoma and treated with chemotherapy is about 12 months. Remember that this represents a significant portion of a dog's life. During this period the dog will have a good quality of life. Importantly, it also gives pet owners the chance to really cherish and enjoy their beloved pets whilst they are still healthy, and mentally prepare for the fact that their disease will probably return at some point in the future (on average in about a year).

Having said that, some dogs (up to 15%) can be cured with the treatments we use. I have seen dogs that lived normal healthy lives for 4 to 5 years after treatment finished before their disease returned. This represents about one third of a dog's life, a great result (or to equate in human terms, the same as a person living disease free for 25 years).

My experience with these dog owners is overwhelmingly positive, and they are really glad that they chose to treat (sometimes after initial misgivings). We sometimes organise for these clients who have had great experiences following chemotherapy to speak with owners of a newly diagnosed case to help in their decision making.

I chose to write about chemotherapy and cancer in the hope that I could dispel some of the misconceptions pet owners may have about it. Malignant Lymphoma and chemotherapy has also been on my mind as we I have just started treating a new case that has been quite intriguing.

This little 6 year old dog (we'll go with the nom de plume "Peppi") presented with a rare form of lymphoma that was just affecting his lungs. There were no discrete lumps as such in his lungs on x-rays. There was just a diffuse "whiteness" all through the lungs, whereas normal lungs full of air look black on an x-ray.

Peppi was an extremely sick dog. He had hardly any remaining lung capacity and every breath was a struggle. He was going to die unless we did something for him quickly. We collected some cells from his lung tissue and airways that a pathologist could look at. This confirmed the diagnosis of lymphoma.

In Peppi's case it was more difficult to give an accurate prognosis, firstly because of the rare type of lymphoma he had (there is very little information in the veterinary literature about this form of the disease), and secondly because he was already so very unwell. From the appearance of his lungs on the x-ray and the extreme difficulty he was having breathing I do not believe he had more than a week or two before his disease took his life.

Peppi's owners were very keen to do everything possible for him. His diagnosis was made on a Wednesday afternoon and we organised an urgent courier so that we would have the required drugs for his first week of chemotherapy on the following morning. As I write this that was 10 days ago. Three days ago Peppi returned for week 2 of his treatment.

The transformation in this little dog was absolutely astonishing. He had gained weight, his appetite and energy levels were back to normal, as was his breathing. I had to know what his lungs were looking like so I took some follow up x-rays. I expected there to be improvement just based on how well he was doing.

I could not believe what I saw on the x-rays. His lungs were back to normal after one dose of chemotherapy. In 20 years of practice I have never seen such a dramatic change as this.

What the future holds for Peppi we do not know at this stage. His disease is so rare that there is little information we can provide on what to expect. What we do know is that Peppi's owners are overjoyed to have their normal 6 year old canine friend back to normal. They know how close to death he was, and treat every day with him as a bonus. As far as I'm concerned, from a purely professional point of view, this has been an extremely satisfying and heart-warming experience.