

Dr. Roughie's Questions and Answers

The Physical Examination-Money Well Spent

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For weeks I have been engaging in my usual last-minute torment about what health problem to discuss in this issue's column. I carried references home for my appointed date with the computer, only to discover at a very late hour that I mistakenly carried the wrong text home from the practice. Perhaps this is fortunate, because I have elected instead to discuss the importance of what is perhaps the most underrated tool in veterinary and perhaps in human medicine. That tool is the simplest and most ancient of all diagnostic modalities. Little in the way of special equipment is required. That tool is the physical examination as performed by a competent medical practitioner. I still remember the words of one of my teachers in veterinary school, which follow: "You will misdiagnose far more by what you fail to see, than by what you fail to know." As the use of technological equipment in the practice of medicine expands by leaps and bounds, it is easy to get caught up in all of the excitement about these tools, while ignoring the most valuable and permanent tools of all, those of sight, sound, smell, feel and experience. These tools are never outdated.

As a breeder as well as a veterinarian, I have even had to jog my own conscience about the importance of the physical examination. Sheepishly, I have had to remind myself to place the seven-week-old puppy, about to be shipped to a new home, onto the exam table for the complete physical. Like many breeders I have held this puppy, fed this puppy, worried over every nuance of this puppy. I have checked its bite, checked for descended testicles, checked its balance and type. I have dewormed it and vaccinated it. All of these tasks were performed either for the pup's welfare, or to make decisions about whether it was a show prospect or whether it was a pet. But what about the complete physical examination? The physical examination requires more than these rudimentary steps.

The complete physical examination starts at the tip of the nose and progresses to the tip of the tail. I still remember finding very small rear dewclaws on an eight-week-old show prospect. How had I missed these? While they certainly posed no health threat to the pet, I did have to ask myself whether I would want to deal with them while grooming the dog for the show ring. How many times would they be snagged by the buyer's comb? They were promptly removed prior to placement. I also recall doing a health certificate physical for a breeder friend. The patient was an apparently healthy twelve-week-old puppy about to be shipped to a pet home. An unusual mass was located during routine palpation of the pup's abdomen. Further diagnostics revealed that the mass was an ectopic kidney (a kidney located in the wrong place). Ironically, if the puppy had been kept as a show or breeding prospect, it is likely that he would never have been examined. While he is a healthy pet, it is questionable whether he would have been a suitable breeding prospect. And yet had he been such a prospect, he would have never been seen for his health certificate physical. Wouldn't it be just as important to ascertain that the dogs we keep and use in our breeding program are just as healthy, and more so, as the dogs we ship?

For many years, the mainstay in most veterinary practices has been the routine administration of annual vaccines. While most practices charged exorbitant prices for the vaccines, the physical exam that was given at the time of these vaccines was either a "no-charge" or an apologetic afterthought. And yet indeed, if properly performed, the most valuable service rendered was the examination. For it is here that in the puppy we discovered congenital heart or eye disease. It is here that in the eight-year-old bitch we detected the pea-sized malignant mammary tumor. It is here that during abdominal palpation we felt bladder stones. And it is here that we discovered dental disease that if treated now would be fully reversible, and if treated later would be progressive.

I wonder as I write this how many breeding animals have never had a thorough physical examination. Far-fetched? Not really. Many breeders give their own vaccinations. Most veterinary practices do not perform a complete physical before giving a routine rabies vaccine. Why not? Because in most areas rabies vaccines are not priced in such a way that a physical examination is being paid for. So how many breeding animals have reached the age of three years and never had a complete physical? Perhaps they are AKC champions and have had an eye clearance. Perhaps they are the apple of their owners eye and have never been sick a day in their lives. And yet they still may have defects or disease, hereditary or otherwise, that has never been detected. These may impact on the animal's welfare in the whelping box, or on the health of the offspring.

I know that as many of you read this you will say, "But I myself do not get annual physical exams!" Join the crowd. But I also urge you to remember that your dog will age far more rapidly than you. And most of us, for one reason or another, do make a dreaded trip to the doctor's office, for one reason or another, every few years. When your dog is one year old, in human years he/she is thirteen to fifteen years old. Would we even consider raising a fifteen year old child without at least one complete physical exam? As your pet ages, the physical examination becomes increasingly important. If the canine patient is examined only once yearly, it is comparable to a human being examined only every five to seven years. That is a pretty long time between check-ups for any patient.

In closing, it is only fair that as I urge you to consider the value of the complete physical, that I simultaneously urge you to demand the best from your veterinarian. Insist that the examination be complete, or go elsewhere. Insist that he/she examine eyes, ears, mouth, reproductive organs, chest, and abdomen in more than a cursory way. Educate yourself on the potential hereditary problems

known in your breed, and at what age they are likely to manifest. Discuss whether at this stage in your animal's life laboratory work or radiographs may complete the picture. Use the examination period to discuss concerns that may either be breed specific, or that may improve both the quality and the quantity of your pet's life.