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Surgery goes to the dogs

At a north Dallas clinic, canines -- and cats -- are treated by ophthalmologists, dermatologists, oncologists and other surprising specialists

By CAROLYN POIROT

Jingles, a large, 9-year-old cocker spaniel, tore the anterior cruciate ligament of her rear left knee, most likely while chasing squirrels in her back yard.

A common sports injury, often called runner's knee, the torn ligament was quickly repaired recently with what looked like four strands of heavy, nylon fishing line -- surgical grade, of course.

Torn ligaments in the knee are among the more common injuries repaired at the Dallas Veterinary Surgical Center, where a patient can get a hip replacement and receive follow-up physical therapy on an underwater treadmill, if that's what the patient needs and the client wants. Animals -- mostly dogs and cats -- are the patients here; people are the clients.

The center is in the Veterinary Referral Center of North Texas, where a unique group of small-animal specialists offer services including radiation and chemotherapy, allergy testing and implanting circular, external, skeletal fixators for complex fractures. Specialist care is provided, only by referral, from about 2,000 area primary-care veterinarians.

Board-certified animal surgeons, ophthalmologists, dermatologists, oncologists, radiologists, neurologists and internal medicine specialists are at the referral center in far north Dallas, just off the Dallas North Tollway, a couple of miles past the Galleria.

An animal cardiologist is joining the group later this summer.

The health professionals use MRI, myelograms, ultrasound, bone scans and all kinds of X-rays and computer-assisted electrodiagnostic equipment to determine what is wrong, where and what the treatment options are.

The referral center includes five specialty clinics: radiology, dermatology, ophthalmology, internal medicine and the surgical center, which also has facilities in Southlake.

There are other board-certified veterinary specialists in this area. What makes the Referral Center different is that five independently owned and managed practices offer services by referral only, in a single animal hospital, where the most advanced therapeutic and diagnostic equipment is available to share, says Joe King, a veterinarian and the center administrator.

And, specialized care is not reserved for fancy breeds and show dogs.

King describes many of the patients as "mixed breed" or "brown cat" or "spotted dog." Pet insurance has made good health care more affordable, and more and more people have health care insurance for their "companion animals," he says.

"All of our patients are very valuable to our clients, but the vast majority are just valuable because they are beloved," King says. "Families obviously think quite a bit of these dogs and cats."

Jingles underwent knee surgery at the Dallas center.

"We go in, open the knee and remove any torn remnants of the meniscus that could be a source of inflammation. Then we close the knee and use 50-pound nylon line to fashion a new tendon," says Darryl McDonald, who is a veterinarian and a diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons.

He discussed the case as he scrubbed for surgery just outside the well-lit surgical suite, which is equipped with continuous temperature, respiration and heart monitors, apnea monitors, oxygen saturation monitors, computerized anesthesia machines programmed to deliver precise amounts of gas, intravenous feeds of medications and fluids, and other emergency and routine state-of-the-art equipment.

Jingles lay covered by blue sheets on a warm water pad. A surgical tray filled with dozens of sterilized forceps, scalpels, scissors, clamps, needle holders, curved needles and bright purple suture material, as well as the nylon line, sat next to the bed. A surgical resident and anesthetist stood by, ready to assist.

The patient's prognosis is "very good," McDonald says the day after surgery, when Jingles was released from the hospital.

"Dense, fibrous scar tissue will grow around the nylon over the next couple of months to further reinforce it and make the knee more stable," he says. "On a larger dog we would have needed a metal plate to stabilize the joint, but on dogs under 50 pounds, this seems to work best."

All the client needs to do now is keep the patient quiet for about eight weeks, and sometimes that's the hardest part, McDonald acknowledges.

Procedures as simple as X-rays and allergy testing usually require some light sedation because animals don't know to hold still, says King. Other than that, these patients are treated pretty much like people with similar ailments would be.

Trouble, a domestic long-hair cat, is undergoing radiation treatment here for soft tissue sarcoma, a cancer that usually responds well to radiation, says Catherine Lustgarten, a veterinarian and diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Radiology.

Her back shaved, Trouble was sedated. Her tumor was targeted with dashes of black magic marker and crisscrossed red laser lights.

Specially designed pads were put in place to protect her spine and vital organs. Lustgarten and a radiology technician went into an adjacent room to observe the patient on a computer monitor while radiation was delivered from all angles so that the tumor got a maximum dose while normal, healthy tissue got as little as possible.

A minute or so after the treatment, the cat was awakened with rubbing and petting. She looked inquisitive, but none the worse for wear.

Her treatments will continue five days a week for three weeks. After about a month, when she has recovered enough so that any incision will heal quickly, she will undergo surgery to remove any remaining tumor.

"With most tumors, we do surgery before radiation or chemotherapy, but with this type tumor, if you disturb it [with surgery], it secretes a chemical that causes the surrounding cells to turn cancerous, so we irradiate first to clean up the margins around the tumor so we can better remove it," Lustgarten said.

She founded the Animal Radiology Clinic in 1980 to provide advanced medical imaging and radiation therapy for pets. She had the first private practice in the country with radiation therapy equipment dedicated to curing cancer in animals.

In February 2000, the Animal Radiation Clinic moved to the new Veterinary Referral Center, equipped with an MRI machine, which helps doctors diagnose health problems in patients and plan treatment, and a modern, linear accelerator that delivers precise amounts of radiation to targeted areas to destroy cancer.

The same day Trouble was receiving radiation therapy, Spankie, a brown-and-white, spotted Labrador mix, was in the internal medicine clinic to undergo diagnostic ultrasound scans. Doctors were hoping to identify the intestinal mass that was causing Spankie to vomit and lose his appetite.

"We've got two different masses -- one abdominal and one intestinal. There, see that," Doug Bronstad, a veterinarian and diplomate of the American College of

Veterinary Internal Medicine, says, while gliding the ultrasound's computerized transducer across the dog's belly.

"It may be that it has metastasized, but I don't see any evidence of cancer in the liver, yet, and her kidneys look good. There's some fluid buildup, but not a lot," Bronstad says.

"We are going to put a needle in and aspirate some cells to send to the lab. We should have results back tomorrow," Bronstad says. He used the ultrasound monitor to carefully guide a thin needle into each of the masses to remove cells and took a little light-pink fluid from Spankie's abdomen. He spread all three samples on slides and sent them to the lab for analysis.

"The fluid is blood-tinged -- not a good sign," the veterinarian says.

Lab results the next day confirmed lymphosarcoma, a diffuse form of cancer that can be treated only with chemotherapy, which Bronstad says could buy the dog nine to 18 more months.

The prognosis for Coco, a large chocolate Labrador with an appointment for skin testing, was much better.

Coco was sedate but conscious as a 3-by-5-inch patch was shaved from his left side, and 36 different allergens were injected in a grid pattern, just under the skin. After 15 minutes, more than a dozen small welts had risen on the patch.

"She is reacting to quite a few. Typically they are allergic to various pollens, weeds, trees, grass and house dust mites," says Dennis Crow, a veterinarian and a diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Dermatology.

Allergies are the most common cause of itching (scratching, licking, rubbing and chewing) as well as chronic skin infections in dogs and cats.

Skin testing is used to help doctors devise a recipe for medicine. Doctors desensitize the pet with a series of allergy shots, often given throughout the pet's life.

"You really can't avoid allergens, but we start these kids on a series of allergy injections, and they usually do very well," Crow says.

The worst thing about allergies is that pet insurance will often not cover treatment unless insurance is in place before allergies are diagnosed. Insurance companies consider allergies a pre-existing condition, Crow says.

Initial exams cost \$86 at dermatology and most of the other referral clinics. In addition, allergy testing runs \$248, and the serum mixture is \$116 for a six-month

supply. Most surgeries run about \$2,400 with complete diagnostic workups. Cost for an MRI is \$1,100 to \$1,500, depending on whether dye is injected. Total hip replacements are \$3,500 to \$3,800.

"Allergy testing is the most frequent thing we do here," says Reid Garfield, a veterinarian and a diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Dermatology. He was preparing to remove the partially detached toenails of a dog suffering from lupoid onychodystrophy, a painful, lupuslike disease. He had just diagnosed food allergies in a cat in a nearby cage. The cat was put on a diet of potatoes and venison, two foods that cats do not often encounter and that usually do not cause any problems for them.

Finally, in the ophthalmology clinic, animal specialists treat glaucoma, cataracts, small cancers in and around the eyes and on eyelids, and all sorts of eye injuries, often with laser surgery. Many of the patients wear Elizabethan-style collars to prevent them from scratching or rubbing their eyes after treatments.

Rachel Ring, a veterinarian and a diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Ophthalmology, was using ultrasound recently to determine whether one candidate for cataract surgery might also have a detached retina.

"Retinal re-attachment surgery requires even more specialized care," Ring says. "We send them to Chicago or San Francisco for that." "I only see one to three a year who are candidates for retinal re-attachment surgery, so I refer them. At one a year, you are never going to get good at it, but a few people specialize in it. We refer our cases to them, but then you are looking at \$5,000 for elective surgery."

For a referral to any of the clinics, talk to your veterinarian. For more information, call (972) 407-9571.

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