

This June, I will eclipse my twentieth year as a veterinarian. That's more years than some, but far fewer than others. Recently, while talking with staff here at the office, I have found myself using phrases like "in the old days...", or "years ago..." This observation has all led me to two important conclusions. First, a lot has changed over the past twenty years in veterinary medicine. Most of those changes have significantly improved the quality and quantity of life of our beloved animal family members. Secondly, I've reluctantly concluded that either I missed a couple years in there somewhere, or time just passes way too fast, and I'm getting older. Lucky for you, this column is about veterinary medicine not aging veterinarians, so this month I'll focus on one of the most exciting improvements I've seen in veterinary medicine in the past twenty years-that being advances in pain management or analgesia.

I can't say I remember everything from veterinary school, but I can remember one little interesting tid-bit that has stuck with me for many years. While learning about the intricacies of the nervous system we explored the mechanisms of pain sensation. Our esteemed and revered anatomy professor Dr. Kitchell, shared with us that at one time, many years ago, some in the profession believed that animals didn't feel pain. Of course, he went on to clarify, that veterinarians had since become more enlightened and in fact pain control of animals now is a fundamental tenet in our professional oath.

Dr. Kitchell, has since passed on, but I am sure he would be very pleased to hear where veterinarians have taken pain management over the past twenty years.

Before we can talk about how to control pain we need to first understand how to recognize pain-in a patient that cannot talk. Animals experiencing pain can exhibit obvious signs such as vocalization, agitation, aggression, and restlessness. In these cases recognizing the painful patient is not difficult. The problem is the absence of those signs does not mean the absence of pain in animals. Sometimes an animal may appear comfortable, by human standards, but in reality be quite painful. A good example is the post-operative patient that is "resting quietly". In the past we have interpreted this to indicate that the pet is relatively comfortable. While that post-operative patient may indeed look comfortable, in reality he is likely experiencing some level of pain. Like with people, there seems to be different tolerances of pain with different animals. Making the problem worse, we believe animals are instinctually much less inclined to openly exhibit painful signs when they hurt. In the wild an animal exhibiting pain, limping for example, could be viewed by predators as vulnerable and quickly fall prey.

In cases where we are not sure of the degree of discomfort an animal is experiencing, such as in an ill or injured patient, the veterinarian needs to consciously focus on assessing for pain, possibly using standardized scales to help understand if pain management is needed.

In other cases we don't need to ask if an animal is experiencing pain-we know they are. An example of this would be a surgical patient. All surgery, by definition, is invasive and will result in some degree of pain. We should not wait to see if that animal exhibits painful signs before we decide to intervene. Remember, animals will not likely exhibit the full degree of discomfort they are experiencing.

Interestingly, there is evidence that the recovery and healing processes are slowed if a patient is painful. Therefore, effective management of any sick patient should include pain level assessment and management.

Veterinarians have many options-some old, some new-for managing pain. Research indicates that the best pain control is obtained when preemptive methods are used. This is when medications are started before that pain-causing insult occurs. Preemptive analgesia, as this approach is called, is not always possible but is primarily used when dealing with anticipated surgical pain.

In addition to preemptive analgesia practices we have also seen benefits with polymodal pain management. This is when multiple types of pain medication are used together to maximize pain control. Polymodal analgesia must be approached very carefully by the doctor as not all types pain medications can safely be given together.

Thankfully, modern veterinarians now have at their disposal many tools and methods to effectively control pain. The recent focus on pain management in animal medicine has been so extensive that entire texts have been published on the topic. Additionally, many lectures and meetings have been organized to help veterinarians update their approaches. Talk with your veterinarian about what measures he/she is taking to assure your pet is as comfortable as possible.

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