

## “Modern day vaccine programs for pets”

By all accounts the veterinary medicine available to the pets of my childhood years was high quality, cutting edge stuff.

Like most, I remember vividly the pets our family had when I was a kid. “Fluffy” and “Arnold” the cats, “Rex and “Sam” the dogs. Who knows, maybe they played some role in my becoming a veterinarian. My father always encouraged me to pursue my interest in animals (honestly, I think he had the same interests). He would later tell me he wasn’t trying to direct me toward a career in animal health, rather he believed those experiences with animals taught me important lessons about compassion, and the importance of “others” in our world. I think my dad was right.

Things have changed a lot since the 1960’s. In those days “veterinary care” for our family consisted of annual trips to our small town firehouse with the dog. One Saturday morning each year our hometown veterinarian would stand behind a card table wearing a wrap-around white smock looking more like a butcher behind a meat counter than a veterinarian trained in animal healthcare. He was there to give rabies vaccines to the dogs in town. Honestly, I don’t ever remember taking our dogs to his veterinary office (though some years later I would get my first veterinary job there cleaning cages and kennels). And the cats; I don’t think they ever got any veterinary care, let alone any vaccinations.

In those days, the typical “trip to the vet” was focused on one thing: getting the dogs’ their shots. This proverbial call to action in veterinary medicine endures today, but hopefully with some refinement. Over the past twenty to thirty years two paradigm shifts have occurred in the practice of veterinary medicine that have changed how we view a “trip to the vet”. First, which I’ve discussed before in this column, veterinarians and pet owners alike have come to realize that animals live longer, healthier lives if simple preventative measures are taken when a pet is healthy, rather than waiting until a pet becomes sick and trying to solve problems then. Routine check-ups, regular dental care, nutritional and behavioral counseling are just a few of the reasons pets are living longer today. Second, and the motivation for this month’s column, is a complete shift in veterinarians’ understanding of vaccinations and their role in a pet’s health.

As mentioned earlier, vaccinations have always been a mainstay in veterinary practice. And for good reason; any veterinarian that practiced in the days when Distemper and Parvo were widespread, killing many dogs young and old, will attest to the miracle of immunization. Today, Rabies in domestic animals is rare in the industrialized world; largely due to effective vaccines, and laws mandating their use.

Recently though, some new information has shed light on possible health risks associated with vaccinating our pets. It turns out that vaccinations may not be as innocuous as once thought. For example, it’s now well established that, though uncommon, some vaccines may cause cancerous lumps at the site of vaccine injection in cats. In addition, vaccinations have been blamed for some immune system diseases in dogs (though this issue is still debated, and far from proven).

This is not to say we should abandon common sense, and the huge benefits gained by immunizing our pets, and stop protecting our pets with vaccines. Quite to the contrary, we need to refine, modernize, and possibly even expand our efforts at

preventing infectious disease. Nonetheless, there are some changes that need to happen as we consider how best to protect our animal family members.

- 1) We need to change how we select which pets get which vaccines. There are a lot of different vaccines made for pets today (and aggressively marketed by drug companies). We would be wise to dispense with the old approach, where everyone gets the same shot(s), and where more is better. Additionally, how do concurrent illnesses, age and lifestyle affect a pet's need for immunization?
- 2) Safer vaccines need to be made by drug companies without compromising protection. Many companies have seen this issue on the horizon for some time now, and are developing improved vaccine products; some are on the market today.
- 3) In recent years, studies have shown that some vaccines that have traditionally been boosted annually may actually provide protection for much more than one year. Thus, at least with some vaccines, we may need to rethink Fido's "annual shots".
- 4) Risk assessment is another player in this process. Do all pets have the same risks for infectious disease? Not really. Individual immunization programs should reflect each pet's unique risks for contracting a given illness. Some of these decisions are made for us by state laws and local ordinances, namely, with Rabies vaccination programs. Remember, at their core Rabies immunization programs in pets are designed ultimately to prevent human infection and, considering the fatal nature of Rabies, the guidelines should be followed closely.

The take home message here is that vaccinations are no longer the "rubber stamp" they used to be. You and your veterinarian need to discuss your pet's risks and needs and together decide what is best. All medical procedures carry some risk. The risks associated with vaccinating your pet remains extremely small. Nonetheless, your veterinarian and healthcare team are best positioned to help you understand and navigate these questions.

To say the least, the concerns surrounding pet vaccinations have changed a once perfunctory formality into a somewhat complicated issue. Don't let this dissuade you. Talk with your veterinarian; learn what's available and best for your pet; because ultimately, if your pet lives a happier, healthier life, you both win.

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