

“...Let’s run a CBC, chemistry, electrolytes, U/A, and a stat BG, PCV and T/S!”

Our hospital nursing staff hears this phrase from the doctors often. This alphabet soup of requests is a list of common laboratory tests run on patients in the hospital.

Everybody knows that laboratory testing of blood, urine and body tissues is an integral part of medical science, but I would be lying if I didn’t say that some pet owners are a little hesitant to authorize lab work on their pets.

Maybe it’s the thought of their pet getting stuck with a needle, maybe it’s the cost, maybe it’s the fear of actually finding something wrong with their pet, or maybe the reasons for running the tests are not clear. Don’t get me wrong I’m not finding fault here, in fact I understand some of the hesitation. I myself have had some reservations when my family members (both animal and human) have been ill and tests have been ordered.

Veterinarians can find themselves requesting a lot of lab tests on their patients. My objective with this month’s column is to explain why this is, and hopefully help pet owners better understand the value of these tests.

Centuries ago somebody figured out that internal physiologic changes in a patient (i.e., disease) can cause changes in their blood and urine. With blood and urine fairly easy to obtain from patients, clinicians had a new “window” inside the body that would divulge information previously available only with surgery, or worse yet on post-mortem exam.

Since those early discoveries the field laboratory diagnostics has seen incredible sophistication and specialization. This is especially true in human medicine but veterinary medicine has enjoyed many of those benefits as well.

With a few exceptions, the routine blood and urine tests run on dogs and cats are very similar to those run on humans. In fact, I’m told, in the days before veterinary diagnostic labs existed, veterinarians would send blood samples to the local human hospital lab for analysis.

If we think about it, we recognize that laboratory tests are usually ordered in two general circumstances: in sick patients, in an effort to find the problem and return the patient to health; and in apparently healthy patients, in an effort to identify problems in their very early stages when they’re more successfully managed.

The problem for veterinarians is how do we know when an animal is sick...or healthy for that matter? People, when ill, will often communicate to someone (family, friend, doctor) that they’re not feeling well. Sick animals, on the other hand, seem to intentionally hide their early signs of illness. This, some believe, is an instinctual “left-over” from the wild animal that avoids showing any failing or weakness for fear of falling prey to an animal one link higher on the food chain.

When veterinarians finally do see sick animals they’re often in advanced stages of their disease process. These animals can’t tell us “where it hurts” (or if it hurts at all), and may be a bit resistant to even being examined. In these sick patients, timely lab-work can help us focus our diagnostic and therapeutic efforts. This not only helps us obtain an early, more accurate diagnosis but may also save the pet owner substantial cost by reducing hospital time and unnecessary care.

The hope, of course, is to not let the animal get so sick before we intercede. In the symptom free, apparently healthy patient, lab-work in the form of regular lab screens can help identify problems before the pet begins to show signs of illness. These lab tests can also provide a baseline of “normals” for that particular animal.

As our modern culture further validates and celebrates our bond with animals, veterinarians are continually asked to do more to help improve the quantity as well as quality of pets’ lives. There’s no doubt laboratory testing, in both sick and healthy patients, has become central to meeting these demands.

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