

Living With 'Cushings' Disease

Living with "Cushings Disease", or would it simply be better to say "Coping with Cushings Disease". Not an easy task however you put it and now, in hindsight knowing what we know, we aren't too sure we could go through it all again. This doesn't mean to say that we wouldn't if we are unfortunate to have another of our dogs develop the disease. "Lulu" was our first one in over thirty years, although we have since learnt terriers of all sorts are prone to this problem – at the moment, we are strong enough to think it might have been less selfish not to subject her to all the necessary treatment – BUT, who knows how we are going to be feeling if we ever have to make the choice again? The heart may rule the head!! To prevent her suffering when she started badly hemorrhaging from her bowel, we ended up having to put "lulu" to sleep just after her twelfth birthday. She had survived for over three years from the time of the initial diagnosis of Cushings Disease although we now suspect she probably was suffering the onset for about a year before then.

I guess the first symptoms weren't that easy to recognize, loss of hair! Yes, we did notice we were constantly cleaning the kitchen floor because there seemed to be plenty of loose hair around – but having six other dogs at the time you simply assume they are all moulting rather only one of them and just get on with the job of cleaning it up. She never had a heavy coat, but a nice tight close one, so it wasn't immediately obvious that it was only her that was shedding her coat – particularly since it was from the flanks and belly area. "Lulu" always had a healthy appetite and would pinch any leftover food so that when she started putting on weight, albeit round the middle, we didn't see this as a warning either – until we put her on a diet and she still didn't lose the spare tyre. We then became aware that she was drinking rather

more than normal, she always seemed to be emptying the water bowl – in fact, several times she was treated for cystitis since she had to spend a penny all the time and sometimes could only just make it onto the door step before she made a puddle.

Eventually we decided we needed to get to the bottom of the problem, we were not happy with how she looked, by now she was practically bald from the chest downwards, she was ravenous all the time and now snatched food if you offered her anything (something she had never ever done before, she was always so gentle) and she was getting very lethargic. Having read up various diseases we hit on Cushings Disease but because we had never come across it before, we weren't at all sure.

The Vet didn't think this was what she had – he thought it might be a thyroid deficiency so we left her there for the day for various blood tests to be carried out – the results came back after a couple of days – no, it wasn't Cushings but thyroid and would be quite easy to control. Sheer relief at the result but short lived, sadly, two days later the Vet rang – the laboratory had made a mistake and we needed to have the tests done again (this time, free of charge). The next results showed that indeed she did have Cushings. We were told "Now comes the difficult part; the art of controlling the disease is getting the correct dosage of the drug". You soon realize what the Vet means – priced about £1.80/capsule, the drug is a very expensive one and, of course, isn't easy because they only came in one strength. (By the way, nearly three years later, they do make a half dose, but it is almost the same price as the full dose). To begin with, it means a dose every day at the same time, a day's stay at the Vet for blood tests about every month, and fairly accurate monitoring of water intake –

then, if you are lucky enough to get the disease stabilized – you see an improvement in the animal. It took about three months of these visits to sort our "Lulu" but we were very lucky because she responded extremely well, water intake slowed down, appetite decreased and hair started to grow back (I now understand a lot of people aren't so lucky and lose the battle after only a few weeks). In fact, we often laughed at how much hair eventually grew on her tum and just how thick her coat became.

Over the next two years, we believe she was happy and had a reasonable quality of life – In turn, of course, we had to make sure she had her medicine regularly, keep a constant eye on her for the start of any sort of infection (because the disease shatters the immune system) and foot the hefty bills for the medicine and check-up blood tests to ensure that everything was going well. Not that we complained – we loved her and were prepared to do the best we could.

The last twelve months of her life were not so good – one of her blood tests showed she needed a lower dosage of the drug – but when we tried a dose very other day – she didn't respond well. We then had to try a dose every two days, which was worse. It was then decided what she really needed was a smaller dose every day – but, as I previously said, at the time they only manufactured a 60 mg capsule. Our Vet was extremely helpful and managed to have the capsules emptied and the powder split and put into smaller capsules – a difficult and unpleasant task as the drug is not without its hazards, but the smaller dose every day put things back on track once again. not one of them ever resisted.

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“Hair loss is a typical symptom of this disease...”

(continued)

"Lulu" then had her good and bad days. Sometimes she would eat and then it was no problem to give her the medication – when she had a bad day, it was sheer hell. She was suspicious of any tidbit on offer, refused everything, and simply clamped her teeth together in order to avoid anything being put into her mouth – the mouth was staying firmly shut and that was that!! Exasperation wasn't the word I had in mind – but I'm sure you will all understand. On a good day, she would go about her usual routine, pretending she didn't know you were only giving her special little treats because there was something nasty tucked away inside and so we managed, until just before Christmas when she developed a bad bout of diarrhea which really knocked her

...‘LULU’ THEN HAD HER GOOD AND BAD DAYS ...

back and we really thought this was the end. But on no, she was a fighter and although by now her back legs were extremely frail and weak (Cushings causes extreme muscle wasting too), she struggled against all odds, recovered and for a short while seemed to have a new lease of life. However, it wasn't to be for long at the end of January she lost her appetite, started to lose weight and most of the time didn't seem to take much interest in what was going on around her but in spite of this, she still used to assert her authority over the other dogs in the evening when they all came into the lounge – she had first choice of the basket near the fire! Strange thing is, not one of them ever resisted.

By early March it was obvious that sooner, rather than later, we were going to have to make that awful

decision and let her go – the good days were becoming rare. Then things were taken out of our hands anyway – she had another bout of diarrhea that ended up with severe hemorrhaging and when the Vet came in, there really was no choice but to let her go to sleep peacefully in her own home, in familiar surroundings – without further suffering.

It's only days since she went and we still miss her dreadfully, so it's hasn't been easy writing this article. No matter how many dogs you have, or have had, it is never easy to lose one – even if you know they have had a long life, been loved and cared for – there's always going to be that empty space they used to fill.

However if it perhaps means someone recognizes the symptoms and obtains an early diagnosis of Cushings (before it gets too much of a hold) – they may not have to face the problems we did.

MARY & HARRY COBLE



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