

ANNI BEATS THE ODDS



A moving story by Jane Saunders on how she, and her dog Anni, battled against hypercalcaemia

Anni's troubles commenced in January 2000 when surgery for bladder stones had revealed a large kidney stone. Regular x-rays were commenced along with a special veterinary prescription food to maintain the correct ph balance within her urine. Despite our best efforts she continued to suffer from repeated urine infections and the kidney stone showed no signs of reducing in size. Towards the end of the year abnormally high blood calcium levels were noticed and we first heard about the P word.

P stands for parathyroid. These 4 tiny glands are situated close to the thyroid gland although they have no relationship to the thyroid. They are responsible for secreting a hormone that regulates the calcium/phosphorous ratio in the body. A condition known as primary hyperparathyroidism occurs when small, usually benign tumours grow on one or more of the glands. This in turn causes them to become overactive and secrete too much of the parathyroid hormone (PTH, parathormone) into the bloodstream. The result of this action is that the calcium levels in the blood rise and hypercalcaemia results. The unaffected parathyroid glands shut down in an attempt to normalise the calcium levels and eventually irreversible damage is done to the kidneys and other major organs, leading to death.

This condition is considered to be rare in dogs although research in the USA has shown that our breed has a predisposition. The UC Davis Book of Dogs (1995, ed. Seigal) cites our breed but does not indicate a sex preference. The main problem with the disease is that the symptoms shown can be so easily explained by the ageing process. These include increased water consumption, and urination, an increasing stiffness of gait, lethargy, inappetence, vomiting, exercise intolerance, weakness. Eventually the affected dog dies of what seems like old age, except it isn't necessarily that old. The disease generally has a late onset, 7 years plus (average age 10 years) and dogs can die as young as 8 or 9 years, usually of acute kidney failure. Anni was 9 years when diagnosed.

Following diagnosis Anni was quickly referred to a specialist the University of Cambridge Queens Veterinary Hospital. We took her there on February 14th and the affected parathyroid gland was removed the following morning. It was 8 long days before we were able to make the long journey to Cambridge to bring her home. The operation to remove the affected parathyroid gland was a complete success. Hypocalcaemia frequently develops after surgery so the first few days are critical. After several days of careful monitoring by veterinary staff it was felt that Anni's calcium levels were stable enough for her to come home on supplements.

Originally it was thought that Anni would need to remain on Calcium and vitamin D supplements for four to six weeks, however, we were to find out in the following weeks that patience was the key word. Anni had to go to our own veterinary practice every week for a blood test to assess her calcium levels and adjust the supplements accordingly. At first we seemed to be progressing well and each weeks results allowed us to reduce the daily calcium intake from four down to one calcium tablet a day. Then we started going backwards and each time we reached one calcium per day the levels went too low and we had to increase the dose!! We even tried 1½ which was a work of art as the tablets were thick and had no mid line! Then towards the end of May a test suddenly dropped below the bottom of the normal range and we began to wonder what was going to happen next. This happened for two weeks and we had to double the supplements. Interestingly the drop coincided with the mid point of her season. This as it turned out was the turning point the calcium levels rose dramatically the following week and we entered the final stage.

Anni finally ceased all supplements on August 13th, six months after the surgery. It had been a long haul but worth all the effort as she had come through the long months of treatment a happy, healthy dog. In all, our vet Sue had carried out 28 blood tests and Anni had come to see her weekly trips to Sue as a social event! Pulling her way into the surgery and greeting staff on her arrival. She went through all the colours of sticky bandage including the ouch! ones and never once complained. She still gets excited on a Tuesday morning, before realising that she is not going anywhere! We made the final journey to Cambridge at the end of August for follow up tests and x-rays. The good news was that all blood analysis were in the normal range and miraculously Anni's kidneys are still functioning well. The one disappointment was that the kidney stone is as large as ever but she can live with this.

I cannot thank my vet enough for her dedication and for identifying the condition. The staff at Cambridge were also first class and very caring.

Anni has proved that the condition need not be fatal but we do need to monitor our older dogs. I have received wonderful help and support from an American breeder and we both feel that more co-operation between countries can only benefit our breed. There have been many more diagnosed cases in the States across many lines and also in puppy-mill dogs. Awareness of the condition plus the routine annual health screening of senior dogs means that the raised calcium levels are detected and remedial treatment can take place before irreversible kidney failure occurs. Monitoring can also be carried out through urine analysis as this will throw up increased levels of calcium within the urine and can be even more sensitive than blood testing.

A test for blood and/or urine calcium levels would be advisable for any dog with a problem of recurrent stone and gravel formation and urine infections.

I know of a bitch that had surgery when Anni's age that is now a happy, healthy 14 year old, so I hope that the terrible twins will be with us for many years to come.

Anni was not content with having one health problem. One morning in March she suddenly appeared in the garden on three legs. My worst fears were confirmed by my vet, Anni had torn a cruciate ligament. We all decided that she had been through enough surgery and given rest it would heal. Thankfully nature has done an excellent job and she was able to enjoy her recent holiday on Exmoor with the rest of the family. She even managed to chase a squirrel up the cairn on the top of Dunkery Beacon!!! I wonder what constitutes hunting with dogs!!

Some might ask 'was it worth it?' My answer would be yes every time because at the end of the day my dogs are my pets first and show girls second.

Sadly, Anni died shortly after this article appeared in 'Keeshonds Today'.

Jane would like to dedicate her story to a hope that other dogs will be saved.