



HERE'S A SECRET ...

Mistakes Don't Define You, But They Do Change You!

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The most terrifying 5 minutes of the day always falls between the time I walk through the door and when I put on my stethoscope. Will I get rapid-fire questions? Be greeted by smiles or groans? Hear morning radio or dogs barking? Every veterinarian knows that's the moment that good news or bad news always gets delivered.

"Coco is back." I could see the vet tech's face as I turned the corner one morning. "Wait! What?" I yelled as his form retreated into an exam room. Two days prior, I had performed a cesarean section on Coco, a tiny blond Chihuahua. Her single puppy, nearly as large as she was, was safely delivered and her surgery almost totally unremarkable. Every single step was completed exactly as I had done before ... except 1.

I used a new closure technique, a common method used to reduce anesthesia time without sacrificing safety—or so the research says. With the defiance and confidence of a less than 5-lb dog, Coco had done well trying to taste test the technician's fingers and was discharged to her doting owner's care the next day. Just 24 hours later, Coco had the audacity to go outside and as she bore down to urinate, her insides popped outside.

As my colleague gave me the run down in the office that morning of everything he had done to repair her incision and repair the owner's confidence in veterinary care, he also saw my face fall, my brain drain, and my heart break. All I could think was how my mistake had nearly killed Coco. I spiraled. I was a bad surgeon. I was a bad veterinarian. I was a bad person. I was lucky that my colleague caught me before I fell. "Stop! We'll figure this out." With his help, I was able to see that the technique I used may work for many veterinarians, but it didn't work for me. Could I try it again? Sure. Have I? No. In fact, my colleague helped me see that it wasn't even really a mistake. If you did the same surgery the same way I did that day, Coco might've be fine.

My "mistake" was just a decision I made with the best intentions. It didn't end my career. I went on to make other "mistakes." Sometimes even my best decisions and best actions did not yield the best results. That doesn't mean those are mistakes; those are battles that I lost to disease, infection, biology. They taught me more about veterinary medicine than my successes!

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This column is titled "The Secret Life of Vets" so I can talk about the secrets that really should be considered well-known truths. These are the not-so-secret secrets that can help change our thinking and our profession for the better.



Ben Kirchner