



HERE'S A SECRET ...

Judgment Doesn't Always Serve You

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Textbook. The plicated intestines may as well have been highlighted in neon as much as they stood out to me on the cat's radiograph that day. But still, a storm cloud rolled in to overshadow the satisfaction of an easy diagnosis and clear recommendation for surgery. To me, the cat's owner's pointed beard and colorful tattoo collection painted him more as a 90s alternative rock fandom than fiscally prepared pet owner. While I nervously went over the surgery plan and costs, fully prepared to discuss alternatives, the owner just nodded and agreed. When I paused at the end of my spiel, I was shocked when he turned to his spouse, busy corralling their young children, and said, "I knew it was a good idea for us to set aside an emergency fund just in case."

That day began a long and complicated series of lessons on judgment. I've written before on professional judgment and why it is so important to use your medical knowledge and instincts to make decisions, but it is actually far more important and much harder to set your personal judgment aside. Pet owners are first and foremost people, and people know when we have already made up our mind about them.

It is difficult to drum up sympathy, much less empathy, for the owners whose beagle with a mass the size of a watermelon that "just appeared yesterday," for whom you haven't seen for preventive care for years, and who couldn't come in last week because their mother's third cousin's step-sister crashed their car. (I find the excuses are proportional to the size of the medical problems in nearly every case.) Every professional instinct you have is screaming that this has been there for years, that you had more treatment options then, less invasive and less expensive ones as well.

But did you? Do you know for sure that 2 years ago the mass was there and it would have been easy to surgically remove, or that the owners would have had the means, financially or logistically, to address it then? Whether it is a senior diabetic dog who is in diabetic ketoacidosis again despite the owner's best efforts or an unvaccinated puppy with parvo, assigning a moral character, even internally, to the owners for past actions doesn't change the animal's condition that day. It just makes them less likely to feel like you care about the problem at hand. And maybe you can't be empathetic in those situations, but maybe all you have to do is be neutral.

We also know that there are many, too many, conditions that can't be predicted. We have to work with the problems we are presented with now—in the present! Leave clients room to surprise you, and you just might find yourself returning a very happy cat, postsurgery, to the dead ringer for the lead singer of one of your favorite bands.

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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.



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