

I hate to burst the bubble for any young folks out there aspiring to be veterinarians, but the practice of veterinary medicine isn't always the glamorous, heartwarming, "what a cute little puppy" kind of work many people think it is. This month's column will help make my point.

The topic this month...well...stinks. It's a topic though that many pet owners deal with on a regular basis. This month we will talk about anal sac disease.

Anal sacs, or "anal glands" as some call them, are paired, blind-ended pouches just under the skin around the anus. The lining of these sacs produces a very pungent, (and that's being generous) semi-liquid material that exits the sacs via small ducts into the rectum. These sacs are actually scent glands, analogous to the scent glands of a skunk—a topic that needs little elaboration. When excited or frightened a dog (and on occasion a cat) will express this wonderful material onto whatever is nearby. The first indication that anal sacs have been "released" by a pet is a foul smelling odor that permeates the room and lingers despite Herculean efforts to clean up. Many dogs will naturally express their anal sacs with each bowel movement so that at any given time they have little "ammunition" on hand. Other dogs seem to save it up until their trip to the veterinarian's office, where a brave nurse or doctor manually expresses the glands. Usually I collect the smelly liquid in absorbent gauze and quickly dispose of it. But occasionally it will end up on my pants, shoes, or shirt; and I've been doing this long enough to even have it spray in my face. I never thought I would actually be happy I wear bifocals. Each time I'm called on to express a pet's anal sacs I'm reminded of the old veterinary adage "Veterinarians should not *always* stand behind their work".

Seriously though, anal sacs can be a source of medical problems for dogs and cats, and pet owners should know what to look for and when to get help. The most common anal sac issue we see is simple impaction of one or both sacs causing discomfort and the ever attractive scooting of the rear end on the carpet. Many folks wonder if their dog has "worms" when they see their dog scooting. Not likely, most scooting is a result of discomfort in the anal sac(s). For reasons that are unclear, the small ducts that channel the anal sac fluid out to the rectum become clogged. Anal sac fluid continues to be made by the sac lining so pressure builds within the sac and causes pain. Usually this is an isolated problem that occurs from time to time, but for some dogs it can be a problem that recurs frequently, where regular scheduled expressions of the sacs are needed to manage the discomfort.

Occasionally the impacted anal sac will become infected. This can add to the discomfort and even result in a full-blown abscess in the anal area. Fortunately, anal sac abscesses, once opened and allowed to drain, respond well to oral antibiotic treatment. If the glands become impacted frequently or abscesses are a recurrent problem, or the pet or pet owner is unduly stressed by the whole situation, the anal sacs can be surgically removed. The surgery is usually very successful but care must be taken in surgery to not damage the anal sphincter muscles that provide bowel control. Fecal incontinence is a rare but documented risk of anal sac removal surgery.

The most worrisome problem associated with the anal sacs is cancer. Thankfully anal sac cancer is not very common, but it has the most potential for harm. Small tumors can originate in the sac itself and go unnoticed for months or years. If discovered early and surgically removed some pets will do quite well. If allowed to grow, these tumors

can spread to distant sites in the body where therapy is not possible. Regular examination of the anal sac area, especially in older dogs is an important tool for early diagnosis.

The scent glands of many wild mammals are an important way for them to communicate with other animals. In the domestic dog and cat their function seems less important. Nonetheless these small glands are a source of medical problems that are usually mild but occasionally serious. For most pet owners the worst anal sac related issue they'll have to deal with is the embarrassment of watching their dog scoot across the living room floor-just as company arrives.

And for those young people out there who still want to be veterinarians-good for you; despite a few little "inconveniences" it's truly a wonderful profession.

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