

**ACCES for Pet Health**

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**CSI: Veterinary Medicine**

**By Beth Davidow, DVM DACVECC**

Many TV shows focus on solving crimes and the need for post mortem (autopsy) exams is often illustrated and highlighted. We understand that the body may hold the answer for both how the crime occurred and who the culprit was.

What TV shows haven't highlighted is the need for post mortems when people die naturally. Despite continually advancing medical technology, people still sometimes die when we don't understand exactly what they died from or if there was anything we could have done to prevent it. Post mortems are difficult to discuss with surviving and grieving relatives but cannot be performed without permission. It is hard to think of your loved one undergoing the type of procedures we observe in shows like CSI. Because of the difficulty of discussing these procedures and because of health care politics related to reimbursement, autopsy rates have fallen to less than 10% of deaths. While autopsy rates are falling, the rate of error of clinical diagnosis has actually increased. Often the only way doctors can learn is by trying to find all the answers in each case so they are better equipped to deal with the next one.

Post mortem exams are even more important in our veterinary patients because we often have to guess at a diagnosis. We don't always have access to the advanced technology available in people medicine and financial considerations are also more at the forefront. Veterinarians are often asked to make recommendations on whether treatment should be pursued or whether euthanasia would be more humane, sometimes based on very limited information. The only way we know for sure if we made the right recommendation with the knowledge we had is to perform a post mortem.

However, it is as hard for us to talk to owners about post mortem as it is for doctors to discuss this issue with relatives of the deceased. We don't want people to view us as cold or unfeeling, and we don't want to upset someone more by discussing this issue when they are grieving. But we also know that it may be the only way for us to learn and to be more prepared for the next case.

A recent case in our hospital illustrated the value of post mortem both for me and for pet owners. A 13 year old cat presented to the referring vet for a bleeding toenail and hurt toe. At exam, it was also noted that the cat had lost a good deal of weight over the proceeding several months. Complete bloodwork was submitted and showed an elevated white blood count, indicating infection, but no other abnormalities. Antibiotics and pain medication were started and a bandage was placed on the foot. The cat however got rapidly worse and presented 48 hours later with a fast decline in its red blood cell count, indicating blood loss. But there was no obvious source for the bleeding. The anemia (low red blood cell count) was so severe and the cat was so weak that a transfusion was urgently needed. The owner opted to euthanize the cat because of its age, the severe weight loss, and the fast decline. It was an unusual case since the cause of weight loss and bleeding was not obviously evident so I requested permission to perform a post mortem. On the exam, I found that the cat had severe lung cancer that had spread throughout the lung fields. Small hemorrhages were noted on all organs and strongly suggested a condition known as DIC (disseminated intravascular coagulation) that occurs in response to severe infection or cancer. The post mortem suggested that the cat was losing weight due to the lung cancer. The toenail injury probably happened when the cat had a small stroke and was not really related to the underlying problem. The case was a reminder to me of how insensitive bloodwork can be to severe internal problems. The post mortem allowed me to let the owner know that she had really made the kindest, most humane decision for her pet.

Post mortems aren't always needed – we often do know why an animal is sick or why they are suffering. For those cases where we don't know why the animal died, they are crucial because they are the way we improve our skill and thus become better able to help the next patient.

Posted by [Christina Ryan](#) at September 23, 2009 6:23 p.m.

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