

Health Matters — A Visit to the AHT

FOR MANY YEARS NOW, the focus has been on health issues we are aware of within our own breed, some relatively minor ones but mainly glaucoma and epilepsy.

Given the opportunity of learning more about other health concerns, former Basset owner Lynn Wood and I accepted an invitation from the Animal Health Trust to attend their Spring Visit. With our Basset and Basset Griffon Vendéen hats on, we went to Lanwades Park, Newmarket on 16 May to listen to short presentations and see the “behind-the-scenes” work in areas other than those with which we are familiar.

The day was hosted by the Charitable Trust’s fund raisers, who are always seeking new ways to raise money to support the work undertaken at the AHT ranging from the expensive equipment needed to training those who come to the AHT to specialise, the scientists and support staff who are all dedicated to relieving the suffering of animals.

During the day we learned much about the fight against cancer, especially in horses. An initial short talk by Mike Starkey, Head of Molecular Oncology, gave us an insight into the various problems.



Equine sarcoids are the most common skin tumour in horses and ponies and, although they may look like warts, they are locally destructive and are therefore considered by many vets as a form of skin cancer.

Cancers around the eye are a familiar sight at the AHT, though experience is needed in distinguishing between eye tumours and natural discoloration of the iris. Treatment often involves high radiation therapy.

Surprisingly, in the dog world, it is estimated that 95% of cancers are not genetically inherited, that is they are spontaneous. Cancer is caused by damage to DNA. It is not just one disease but up to 200 different diseases. The behaviour of a tumour depends on the type of cell from which it develops and where the cell is in the body. The main causes of death in animals with cancer is tumour spread and so this process is something the AHT is working hard to understand. Tumours of the same type can behave differently if they have different genetic blueprints. Finding ways to beat this complex disease is very difficult.

From sad experience most of us know that bitches are at high risk of developing malignant mammary tumours. These are the most common types in non-spayed female dogs. While 50% of these tumours are malignant, complete surgical removal is sometimes curative if the cancer has not metastasized. Alongside dealing with such cases is research to identify inherited germ-line mutations that cause some pedigree dog breeds to have an increased risk of developing a specific type of cancer.

Dogs referred to the AHT receive the highest possible care and, as Mike Starkey added “They don’t know they have cancer. They come in, they know where the biscuit tin is”.



The Small Animal Referral Centre at the AHT offers world class referral and diagnostic services for cats and dogs.



One important area is Hydrotherapy and Physiotherapy where we were able to see how the treadmill benefits those dogs who find it less intimidating than a pool as the water fills slowly from the bottom.

It offers support for weak patients as some may have osteoarthritis in multiple joints, be recovering from orthopaedic surgery, or managing a neurologic disease. With the dog's weight partly supported by the water, extension of the limbs/joints is greater than with swimming and the treadmill controls how fast the patient moves.

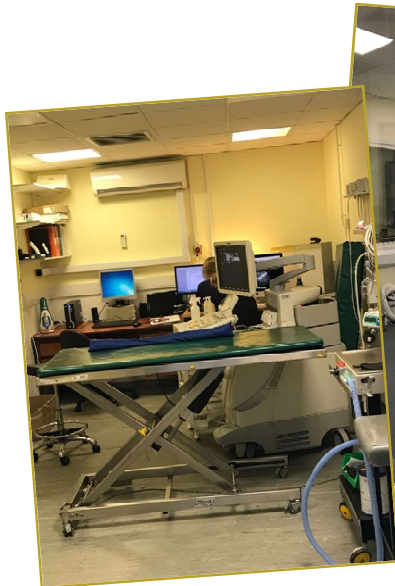
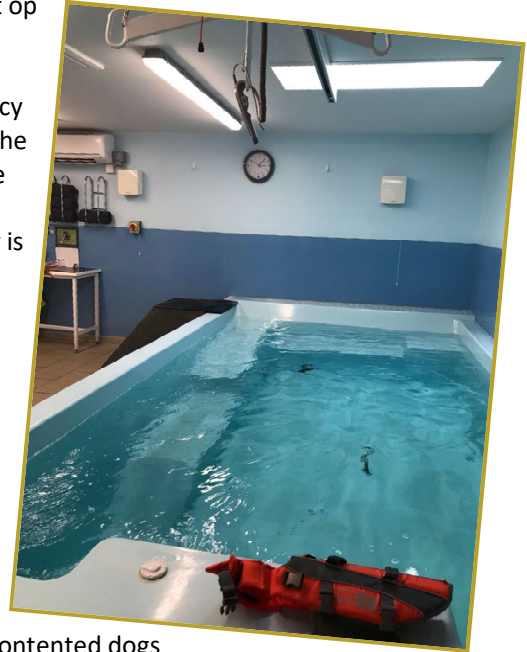
The effects are also gentle and low impact enough for post-surgical patients (eg two weeks post op with sutures removed).

As an alternative, the pool benefits many. The buoyancy of water reduces stress on the joints and this creates a safe environment for recovery after surgery. Hydrotherapy is also beneficial for dogs who are recovering from an

injury, dogs who suffer from degenerative joint disease, and those who have restricted movement.

Overall, hydrotherapy is a safe alternative physical therapy. With the right handling, a dog will be able to recover faster or achieve a higher level of fitness.

Some of us will have been to the Small Animal Referral Centre when our Basset has been sent there for diagnosis of a health problem or treatment. It was therefore fascinating to see areas usually for staff only. Not only the ultrasound scanner and the MRI room but quiet, spotlessly clean corridors, operations taking place, contented dogs in large, clean cages, the wet room dog shower and industrial washing machines constantly on the go.



Funding for core clinical, research and education projects is always needed and, having seen the extensive facilities at the AHT, Lynn and I now realise how money is vital to supporting the dedicated staff and making a considerable difference to the lives of horses, dogs and cats.

Over the years, it has been a tradition for the L&NHC Branch of the BHC to make annual donations to dog-related charities, one of which has regularly been the Animal Health Trust. However if you feel you can help the AHT yourself, to make a donation (however big or small) go to www.aht.org.uk/donate.

Linda Skerritt