The Limp that Became Paralysis in Less than 2 Hours

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We received a call a few years ago from a client who lives over 100 miles from our clinic. She had rescued several racing greyhounds and adopted them. Greyhound racing at organized tracks has increased dramatically in popularity during the past two decades and as a result, an extensive rescue network has formed to find homes for the retired racers. These dogs, with rare exceptions, make excellent family pets.

Maggie, the dog that the owner was concerned about, was a five-year old spayed female. Following a day of running miles while her owner was on horseback, the owner noticed a clicking sound as Maggie walked. One foot seemed to be rolling over and the toenails were dragging on the floor, producing the sound. The dog showed no signs of pain and had no limp, but we asked the owner to bring Maggie in on an emergency basis instead of waiting until the following day. The changes in her gait may have seemed minor but there was a chance that something serious had occurred. To confirm this we needed to examine the animal.

As we observed Maggie walk across the parking lot two hours later, her left rear foot was obviously dragging and she was unable to bear normal weight on that leg. She was limping and when we took x-rays, our worst fears were confirmed. The pictures of the foot, leg and hip looked normal. It wasn't until we got to the x-rays of the 'backbone' or spine, that the cause of the problem was readily apparent.

The x-rays showed an obvious narrowing of the normal space between the last thoracic and first lumbar vertebra. Normally this space is filled with a 1/4" spongy pad we call a disc. Our physical exam and other tests confirmed our diagnosis that Maggie had 'ruptured' a disc, causing it to put pressure on the spinal cord and disrupt nerve flow to the back leg. Her condition had progressed to a limp when she first arrived at the clinic, and less than two hours after her arrival she had lost total use of the leg and could not feel pain or pressure. And worst of all, the right rear leg was beginning to be affected! A decision had to be made immediately. A delay in treatment could lead to total paralysis and death.

Although this IV disc disease can be treated medically, we felt that surgery was the best course of action since the symptoms were progressing so fast. This meant going in and removing a section of the bony vertebrae giving more space for the spinal cord while at the same time removing the ruptured disc. Because a few hours earlier her dog had been perfectly normal and very active, the decision was difficult for Maggie's owner. Thankfully she agreed, because by the time we started preparing Maggie for surgery, both rear legs were paralyzed.

The surgery was uneventful and medications were given to reduce the swelling and inflammation of the spinal cord, as well as relieve the pain. After surgery, we really weren't sure what would happen, but three days later, we began to see use returning to the rear legs. Over the next week Maggie returned to normal.

This case outlines an important point of pet ownership. People who are involved with their pets and notice small and seemingly unimportant changes in their behavior and physical condition need to communicate it to their veterinarians. If Maggie's owner would have waited until Monday morning, there is a good chance that we could have done little to save the animal. By then the spinal cord would have been severely injured and neither surgery nor medicine would have done any good.

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