



“ He is your friend, your partner, your defender, your dog. You are his life, his love, his leader. He will be yours, faithful and true, to the last beat of his heart. You owe it to him to be worthy of such devotion.”

—AUTHOR UNKNOWN

Medical Advocacy 101



You’ve now found yourself totally enamored of a hairy, four-legged creature and will want to do the very best possible job you can to care for him. You feed him high quality food, and provide him with regular exercise and plenty of play time. You even let him sleep on the bed! That’s the easy part. The hard part comes when you need to make significant medical decisions that will impact your dog’s health. You may not have thought much about it at the time, but when you accepted your dog as part of the family you agreed to take care of him both in sickness and in health. You “signed” an unwritten contract, whereby you accepted “power of attorney” to act for your dog and be willing and able to make medical decisions on his behalf.

Your role now becomes much more than caretaker and friend. In exchange for that wagging tail and unconditional love, you now become your best friend’s medical advocate. Maintaining your dog’s health means gathering information, making important choices, dealing with illness, and potentially tackling the question of euthanasia. Welcome to the toughest part of sharing your life with a dog.

Consider the example of Riley, a 12-year-old German Shepherd mix who is cared for and adored by the Johnson family. Riley is the family exercise partner, newspaper retriever, nanny, bedmate, and comic relief in his busy household.



He's also in charge of training the newest family member named Bubba, a 10-week-old Shepherd puppy. But recently, the normally ravenous Riley has been leaving some food in his bowl, tiring on his walks, and vomiting. The family veterinarian has determined from some blood tests that Riley has kidney failure. She's recommended that Riley be hospitalized for round-the-clock intravenous fluid therapy as well as an abdominal ultrasound examination, specialized blood tests, and a possible kidney biopsy to determine the cause. Although the outlook is bleak, it certainly isn't

hopeless. The cost for all this is estimated at \$3,000 to \$5,000.

On first hearing the news, the Johnsons are devastated and confused. They had no idea Riley was so sick. They ask if they had brought him to the clinic sooner, could all of this have been avoided? The three Johnson

children have never known life without their beloved pet. How will they respond to this news? Who will model civilized "doggie" behavior for Bubba? The Johnsons aren't sure the recommended care will be affordable. They don't want to throw in the towel too early, nor do they want Riley to suffer. Should they get a second opinion? Is it reasonable to proceed with the recommended diagnostic tests and treatment with a 12-year-old dog?



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39% of US households own at least one dog.
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The veterinarian asks if they have any questions. Questions? The Johnsons don't even know where to start. They want to do what's best for Riley. The problem is they aren't exactly sure what that is. They feel incapacitated by their lack of medical knowledge and their emotional turmoil.

I suspect that some of you are reading this book because you have a "Riley" of your very own and are perhaps experiencing many of the Johnsons' struggles and emotions. If this is the case, now is the perfect time to learn how to effectively "speak" for your dog.

Why Your Dog Needs a Medical Advocate

Gone are the days when you simply followed your vet's orders and asked few, if any questions. The vet is now a member of your dog's health-care team, and you get to be the team captain! Your job description has evolved from receiving and following doctor's orders to processing and making decisions. This is no easy task given the volume of information and number of diagnostic and treatment choices available today. Consider the fact that in the human field, medical knowledge doubles approximately every seven years. I suspect that this is true in veterinary medicine as well. Many positive changes in the veterinary profession such as ultrasound, advanced surgical procedures, cancer treatments (the list goes on and on) have created even greater need for people to act as their dog's medical advocate. There are far more choices than ever before.

In addition to the family vet (the veterinary version of our primary care physician), people now have access to a barrage of specialists, including internists, cardiologists, neurologists, dermatologists,

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SECRET FOR SUCCESS

Educate Yourself

The best way to become a superb canine medical advocate is to “get smart” about your dog’s health. I know, I know...if you were interested in medicine, you would have gone to medical school. I’m not saying you need to become a Dr. Einstein—only that you need to accumulate and understand some basic information. This will allow you to participate in making sound medical decisions. Say your dog has kidney failure. You don’t need to understand the microscopic physiology of salt secretion within the kidney tubules (although it is fascinating stuff). However, your pup will benefit immensely if you understand how diet, supplemental fluids, and treatment of the high blood pressure that accompanies kidney failure can impact his medical outcome.

Talk to Your Vet

A great way to begin gathering the knowledge you need is by asking your vet lots of questions (see p. 131). Assuming you’ve selected your veterinarian wisely (see chapter 3), she will appreciate your interest and involvement. Like most veterinarians, I delight in explaining things to well-informed clients because the more they understand, the greater the likelihood we will accomplish our mutual goal—taking really good care of their dog.

When it comes to expanding your knowledge, don’t stop with your veterinarian. Take advantage of the entire veterinary staff. Count on them for dog food recommendations, as well as information about vaccinations, heartworm prevention, and flea and tick control.

Read

Another fabulous way to become a savvy medical advocate is to get your hands on current, reliable medical information, and read, read—then read some more. When you come across material that confirms something you’ve already heard about, it will feel as though you’ve received a reassuring second opinion.

When I explain a medical situation to a well-read client, it is as though I can skip elementary school and go directly to junior high—or even high school. The level of understanding that can be achieved during our discussion is invariably greater. There are a number of good books on canine health—see some of my recommendations on p. 376, but ask your veterinarian for hers, as well. I encourage you to keep several (this one included, of course!) on your bookshelf.

Surf the Web

The Internet can be an incredibly useful source of information. I happen to enjoy hearing what my clients are learning online. I sometimes come away with valuable new information, and I’m invariably amused by the extraordinary things they tell me. (Who knew that hip dysplasia is caused by global warming?) Surf to your heart’s content, but be forewarned—not all veterinarians feel as I do. Some detest the practice because of all the “whackadoodle” Web sites their clients access. They don’t want to spend valuable office time talking clients out of crazy notions and reining them in from wild goose chases.

How can you figure out which sites offer trustworthy information? It’s not always easy to tell, but here are some general guidelines:

- ❶ Ask your veterinarian for her Web site recommendations. She might want to refer you to a site that will reinforce or supplement the information she’s provided.
- ❷ Veterinary college Web sites invariably provide reliable information. Search for them by entering the words “veterinary college” after the name of the disease or condition you are researching.
- ❸ Web addresses ending in “.org,” “.edu,” and “.gov” represent nonprofit organizations, educational institutions, and government agencies, respectively. They will likely be objective sources.
- ❹ When your dog has a breed-specific disease, pay a visit to the site hosted by that particular breed association.
- ❺ If you come across business-sponsored Web sites that stand to make money when you believe and act on what they profess (especially if it involves buying something), immediately move on!
- ❻ Be ever-so-wary of anecdotal information. It’s perfectly okay to indulge yourself with remarkable tales (how Max’s skin disease was miraculously cured by a single session of aromatherapy), but view what you are reading as fiction rather than fact. As fascinating as these *National Enquirer*-type stories may seem, please don’t let them significantly influence the choices you make for your dog.
- ❼ Don’t forget about online support groups pertaining to particular dog diseases. I love them because they offer a variety of opinions, and sometimes my clients pick up nifty new ideas and techniques that I get to learn about as well. (Be sure to run anything new by your vet before trying it out on your dog.) In addition, online groups can be a source of tremendous emotional support—always a good thing for the humans involved.

ophthalmologists, radiologists, surgeons, nutritionists, and dentists. Other veterinarians specialize in alternative, or complementary, medicine that encompasses acupuncture, chiropractic, homeopathy, and herb therapy. And, certified veterinary rehabilitation specialists can profoundly and positively impact recovery time and comfort level for dogs suffering from arthritis or recovering from back or joint surgery.



More than 75% of owners say their dog's health is as important to them as their own.

Veterinary technology is also keeping pace with its human counterpart (see chapter 5, p. 77, for details). MRI and CT scanners are now options as are 24-hour veterinary critical care facilities. Dialysis and even kidney transplantation are available for the dog with kidney failure. Chemotherapy and radiation therapy have turned many canine cancers from a death sentence into a treatable disease. Advances in veterinary health care are allowing dogs to live longer lives, so it makes sense that veterinarians are recognizing and treating far more age-related disorders such as kidney failure, heart disease, arthritis, and cancer. Vaccinations are available to prevent 13 different canine

diseases. Hundreds of prescription diets exist for dogs with diabetes, kidney, liver, gastrointestinal, heart, skin, and joint diseases. It seems there are more Web sites on dog health issues than there are dogs. Whew! No wonder your dog needs a medical advocate!

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What are the chances that you'll *never* be called upon to act for your dog in a medical situation? Probably the same as winning the lottery. I'd love to be more reassuring, but the fact is, after almost three decades as a practicing veterinarian, I know only a handful of dogs who maintained

a lifetime of completely good health and vigor right up to the moment of gently and painlessly passing away in their sleep. Sooner or later, almost every dog becomes sick, and for the majority of people, emotional attachment just about guarantees difficult, sometimes gut-wrenching medical decisions will need to be made down the line.

Why the Advocate Needs to Be YOU

Now you know why your dog needs an advocate, but why must it be you? Why not pass this responsibility on to your veterinarian, or your girlfriend who is a nurse, or your first cousin who happens to be a pediatrician? After all, their medical backgrounds seem to give them a clear advantage.

What you may not realize is that *you* are the most qualified of all because absolutely, positively *no one* knows your dog better than you do. You are acutely familiar with the nuances of his daily routine and behavior. You are the one who has the best idea what his soulful expression is meant to convey. Deep down you know better than any veterinarian, medical doctor, nurse, well-intentioned relative, boyfriend, girlfriend, or busy-body neighbor what will most likely cause your dog to wag his tail in triumph. You are also the one who knows whether or not your buddy likely wants to “keep fighting the good fight” when the going gets tough.

The person who is willing to step up to the plate when it comes time to make medical-care choices is far more likely to walk away with peace of mind than one who has deferred to others' opinions.

By all means, solicit opinions from experts and people you trust, but, for your dog's sake, be certain that final decisions come from your own mind—and heart. The person who is willing to step up to the plate when it comes time to make medical-care choices is far more



likely to walk away with peace of mind than one who has deferred to others' opinions. And, even when the outcome is poor, the active participant derives comfort from knowing she had nothing but the best of intentions for her beloved dog. She can take solace in

knowing she put forth her best effort to make informed decisions. When the decision-making responsibility is relinquished and things don't turn out well, it's very easy to feel you have abandoned your best buddy during his time of greatest need. And, when death is the outcome, it can be extremely difficult—and sometimes impossible—for anyone who "bowed out" to move past his or her grief.

Advocacy Starts Early

Consider the following scenario—one I can assure you every small animal veterinarian has endured. It's time for a puppy's first examination. When the vet enters the room, she encounters an incredibly cute, wiggly, waggly fluff ball and his adoring, newfound humans, who are beaming with pleasure. The vet listens to the pup's heart with a stethoscope and detects a heart murmur, darn it. Maybe she heard incorrectly, so she listens again. Yup, it's there for sure, and it's a loud one. One test leads to another until the birth defect has been clearly defined. It's a heart anomaly that will, with certainty, result in a profoundly shortened lifespan. Smiles turn to tears and heartache.

Before You Fall in Love

Your primary goal is a healthy dog, so doesn't it make sense, if possible, to start out with a dog *you know* is healthy? Don't fool yourself into believing that, like a new appliance, you'll simply be able to return the new dog if problems are discovered. Please don't be tempted by breeders and adoption agencies who guarantee a replacement pup if yours is discovered to have flaws. They'll make good on their promise, but you'll be hard-pressed to relinquish the new love of your life. Trust me when I tell you that it typically takes no more than four minutes and 23 seconds for the average person to fall hopelessly in love with a dog. And four minutes and 22 seconds just isn't enough time to make sure all the necessary medical checkups have been performed—or if they have, to study the results! Do yourself a favor and protect yourself from a broken heart by getting the information you need before—not after—you adopt or purchase a new dog.



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58% of dog owners report they visit their pet's veterinarian more than they do their own physician.
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Whether you are adopting from a shelter or purchasing a dog from a breeder, make sure that a veterinarian has evaluated your prospective pup, *before* you meet him! Then make the effort to learn what it is the veterinarian discovered. Don't be seduced by the classified ad that says, "vet-checked" because this says nothing about the veterinarian's actual findings. Try to speak directly with the veterinarian who performed the exam, or at least read through the official medical record. You want to be sure beforehand that the little guy now chewing on your shoelace doesn't have a cleft palate, heart murmur, hernia, or any other congenital health issue.

I realize that it's not always possible to have a dog "vetted" in advance of adoption. If you find yourself in this situation, it's best to

schedule an exam with a veterinarian as soon as you can—preferably on your way home from picking up your new pup.

Special Considerations for the Purebred Pup

Let me begin by saying that I strongly encourage you to find the next love of your life at a pet shelter or a breed rescue service that finds homes for displaced purebred adult dogs. (In addition, I recommend you work with a shelter or breed rescue organization that performs an extensive behavior evaluation on each dog so you have a better chance of finding just the right match.) I recognize, however, that for some a specific breed fits the bill best, a puppy rather than an adult is desired, and a particular breeder is the source that has been recommended by friends, family, or other dog lovers. If this is the case, there are important details to consider before making a puppy purchase.

Here is a situation that every veterinarian can relate to. A one-year-old Labrador Retriever has just started training for his career as a field trial dog. Just a week into the training program, the pup comes up stiff and sore with pain in both front legs. X-rays show that he has an elbow abnormality commonly inherited in Labs. Surgery will

If you plan to share your life with a purebred dog, before you so much as peek at a puppy, learn as much as you possibly can about potential breed-specific inherited medical issues.

be required, and there is significant potential that he will have lifelong arthritis in both elbow joints. His future as a field trial dog has just unraveled. The client is disappointed because the pup's dam and sire (parents) had both been officially certified and found to be free of elbow disease. A little bit of retrospective research, however, reveals that several of the dog's aunts and uncles had unfavorable elbow screenings.

If you plan to share your life with a purebred dog, before you so much as peek at a puppy, learn as much as you possibly can about potential breed-specific inherited medical issues. The more

you know, the more likely you are to choose a puppy free of, and unlikely to develop, such inherited health issues. A word of warning: don't dare rely on the proverbial, "None of my dogs have ever had *that* problem."

A conscientious breeder will offer forth official paperwork rather than verbal reassurances. Study the documents to find out if the parents have been officially and *favorably* screened for the appropriate breed-related diseases. Don't stop there. Take the time to get the same information about the dam's and sire's littermates (all those aunts and uncles). More and more, we are learning the best way to ensure a puppy will be free of inherited diseases is by looking for squeaky-clean health screening results for all his aunts and uncles *in addition* to his parents. What if the dam and sire each had 10 littermates? This means that you are going to be looking at *a lot* of paperwork!

A dog can be officially certified free of specific inherited diseases in a number of ways. First, you need to do some homework to figure out which are the most appropriate screening tests for the breed you are investigating (see below). For example, auscultation of the heart (listening with a stethoscope) may be all that is needed to screen for an inherited heart defect in one breed of dog. In another breed, an ultrasound evaluation of the heart may be the test of choice. How are you to know which screening certification to be satisfied with? Here are some steps to help you figure it out:

- 1 Research which diseases are common or potentially inherited in the breed you fancy. Potential sources of information include your veterinarian, reputable breeders, the breed association, the American Kennel Club, inherited disease registries, and reference materials found online or in current publications.

A conscientious breeder will offer forth official paperwork rather than verbal reassurances.



- ② Find out which screening tests are considered most reliable to check for such diseases and which family members should be screened for them (puppy, dam, sire, aunts, uncles). You can get this information by talking with the experts. Begin with your own veterinarian as well as those who specialize in the health issue of concern. Compare what they have to say with reputable representatives from the breed association (not just the person trying to sell you a puppy).

Let's take Newfoundlands, for example. This breed is predisposed to subaortic stenosis, an inherited heart defect. Learn which heart-screening test is best—listening to the heart with a stethoscope or performing an echocardiogram—by talking with your veterinarian and a board certified veterinary cardiologist, or if that is difficult, a knowledgeable “Newfie” nerd or two. With other breeds, a bone disease might be of concern, so ask for advice from a board certified veterinary surgeon; for eye disease, a board certified ophthalmologist. See chapter 5 for help finding veterinarians who specialize in different diseases.

- ③ Learn how to interpret test results. For example, when it comes to hip screening, the Orthopedic Foundation of America (OFA) and the University of Pennsylvania Hip Improvement Program (PennHIP) are the bodies that evaluate X-rays to determine the presence and severity of hip disease. You'll want to know what test result or “ranking” is acceptable (this varies from breed to breed). What about the puppy with three of 18 aunts and uncles with “poor” hip ratings? Rely on the same expert you consulted in Step 2 for guidance.
- ④ Ask the breeder to provide you with all the paperwork (certificates documenting the results of official examinations) you need to eval-

uate in order to do the best possible job landing yourself a healthy puppy.

Please allow me one paragraph to get on my soapbox. Lots of “puppy mills” (large scale breeding operations that produce puppies for profit—often inhumanely) stay in business because people purchase purebred pups without doing the research recommended above. So, I beg of you, don't even think about purchasing a puppy online, sight (and site) unseen. And, be extremely cautious about an impulsive pet store purchase, where you still need all the same guarantees I've outlined for a direct purchase from a breeder. By buying online or from a pet shop, you may be inadvertently committing the next 10 to 15 years of your life to taking care of an adorable, but inherently unhealthy, product of a puppy mill. One less purchase from puppy mills, even indirectly, is one step closer to their extinction.

Now that You've Fallen in Love

After you've bought or adopted that adorable little shedding and shredding beast, there's more work to be done with regard to potential breed-related health issues (even if you've already done all of the necessary pre-purchase research). Rather than sit around and wait to see if a disease is going to rear its ugly head, consider taking a proactive approach. When it comes to inherited diseases, early detection and intervention can favorably affect long-term outcome.

QUICK REFERENCE Four “Must Dos” before Purchasing a Purebred Dog

- ① Research the inheritable diseases in the breed (see sidebar, p. 20).
- ② Learn about the preferred disease screening tests.
- ③ Find out how to interpret the screening test results.
- ④ Ask the breeder to provide documentation of all of the screening test results.



QUICK REFERENCE Official Canine Disease Registries

CERF: Canine Eye Registration Foundation:
www.vmdb.org/cerf.html

GDC: The Institute for Genetic Disease
Control in Animals:
www.parrotcreek.com/gdc

OFA: Orthopedic Foundation for Animals:
www.ofa.org

PennHIP: The University of Pennsylvania
Hip Improvement Program:
www.pennhip.org

VMDB: Veterinary Medical Database:
www.vmdb.org

Let's say you've adopted a young German Shepherd mix. Have his hips X-rayed when he is still a youngster to check for hip dysplasia (a malformation of the ball and socket joint of the hip). Surgery can sometimes be performed at a young age to prevent or lessen the debilitating arthritis that results from this disease. Perhaps you've acquired a Cavalier King Charles Spaniel—one of the most endearing breeds on the face of the earth, but markedly predisposed to an inherited disease affecting the mitral valve of the heart. An ultrasound evaluation

of the heart when your dog is still a youngster is an invaluable way to establish baseline parameters. Down the road, you can use them for comparison to help determine any progression of the disease.

These abnormalities are easy to investigate in advance when you have a purebred pup, but up until recently, all you could often know with certainty about your mixed-breed dog was that the mom was a young unwed mother, and the father was a bit of a loose cannon. Nowadays, companies offer genetic testing to figure out which types of purebred dogs went into the making of your mutt. So, it's ultimately possible to investigate breed-related health issues in *any* dog.

QUICK REFERENCE Commonly Inherited Diseases

BLOOD ABNORMALITIES

Autoimmune hemolytic anemia
Hemophilia
Von Willebrand's disease

ENDOCRINE DISEASES

Addison's disease
Cushing's disease
Diabetes mellitus
Hypothyroidism

CANCER

Lymphoma
Malignant histiocytosis
Mast cell cancer
Osteosarcoma

EYE DISEASES

Cataracts
Ectropion
Entropion
Glaucoma
Keratoconjunctivitis sicca (dry eye)
Lens luxation
Retinal dysplasia

GASTROINTESTINAL DISEASES

Colitis
Copper storage disease
Gastric torsion
Hepatitis
Inflammatory bowel disease
Perianal fistula

GENITOURINARY TRACT DISEASES

Bladder stones
Cryptorchidism
Fanconi syndrome

HEART DISEASES

Aortic stenosis
Cardiomyopathy
Degenerative valvular disease
Mitral valve dysplasia
Patent ductus arteriosus
Pulmonic stenosis
Tricuspid valve dysplasia

NEUROLOGICAL DISEASES

Cervical vertebral malformation
(Wobbler syndrome)
Deafness
Degenerative myelopathy
Epilepsy
Hydrocephalus
Myasthenia gravis

ORTHOPEDIC DISEASES

Elbow dysplasia
Hip dysplasia
Intervertebral disk disease
Osteochondrosis
Patellar luxation

SKIN DISEASES

Acne
Allergic dermatitis
Demodicosis
Pyoderma
Sebaceous adenitis
Seborrhea

GRETL, a gorgeous and keenly intelligent Bernese Mountain Dog, passed away when she was only eight years old, her life cut short by cancer. Her death left a huge void in her devoted companion Kathie's life, as well as in the lives of the elementary school children who were reading to Gretl once a week as part of their "Share a Book" program, designed to help them progress in their reading skills. Kathie advised me that, of Gretl's five littermates, three had already succumbed to cancer. And, a fourth had died from an undefined illness.

Imagine my trepidation when I was asked to evaluate Bailey, Gretl's last living littermate. Wouldn't you know it—cancer within the abdomen was discovered. At the time of this writing, we are treating Bailey with chemotherapy and hoping for the best.

Please Don't "Litter"

Any discussion about medical advocacy basics would be incomplete without emphasizing the health benefits of spaying and neutering. Of greatest importance is the prevention of undesired pregnancies. They also prevent ovarian, uterine, testicular, and certain types of prostate disease. When performed before a female dog's first heat cycle, there is the added benefit of greatly decreasing the risk of breast cancer. Finally, neutering may prevent undesired behaviors caused by "testosterone toxicity" (roaming away from home, fighting with other dogs) that can result in traumatic injury. Unless you have a valuable purebred dog that you are hoping to breed, begin talking about spaying or neutering at the very first vet visit. And, if you choose to breed your dog, don't



.....
 75% of owned dogs are spayed or neutered.



forget about the potential health benefits of doing so later in life once his or her breeding career is over.