Cases From Our Clinic: The Telltale Cough

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

Timothy, a 13-year-old Yorkshire Terrier, was one of our favorite clients. He had that relentless terrier spirit and was cooperative and happy each time he came in for his annual visit. His owner, Megan, and he walked around town a lot, and they were a typical sight on the downtown streets.

One day Megan came in with Timothy and a worried look on her face. She reported that he wasn't his usual energetic self lately. She knew he would slow down when he got older and at first did not think much of it. Then he started coughing once in a while. Megan simply thought he had a cold, until it didn't go away. Megan started noticing that Timothy coughed every time a visitor came, or she came home, or he was barking at the neighbor's dog. Basically, Timothy was coughing every time he was excited. He also was walking a little slower and coughed on his walks. When Megan reported this to us, we were concerned that Timothy may have a heart problem, so we asked Megan to bring Timothy in.

When we examined Timothy, we listened to his heart and heard a murmur that is characteristic of a heart valve problem. We took x-rays and found the right side of Timothy's heart was enlarged. He also had a small amount of fluid in his lungs. We took blood and urine and tested them both to see if any other organs were affected. The tests all came back normal. We diagnosed Timothy with congestive heart failure and set up a treatment plan for him that included diuretics to remove fluid from the lungs, a medication called an ACE inhibitor that would make his heart work more efficiently and pimobendan, which dilates (opens up) the blood vessels. We also gave Megan instructions to monitor resting respiratory rate, to avoid feeding Timothy high sodium foods, and have ongoing veterinary checks to make sure the protocol was working and that his kidneys were functioning correctly.

We contacted Megan several days later, and Timothy was already starting to show improvement. Two weeks later, Megan reported Timothy was back to his normal, happy self, walking spritely down the street. His chemistry panel, too, was normal and the fluid in his lungs was gone. We kept close eyes on Timothy at first, and then his rechecks, though regular, didn't have to be as frequent. Megan continued to monitor Timothy's breathing rate and any evidence of cough, but he's still going strong.

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