Stories From Our Clinic: The Animal to Animal Bond

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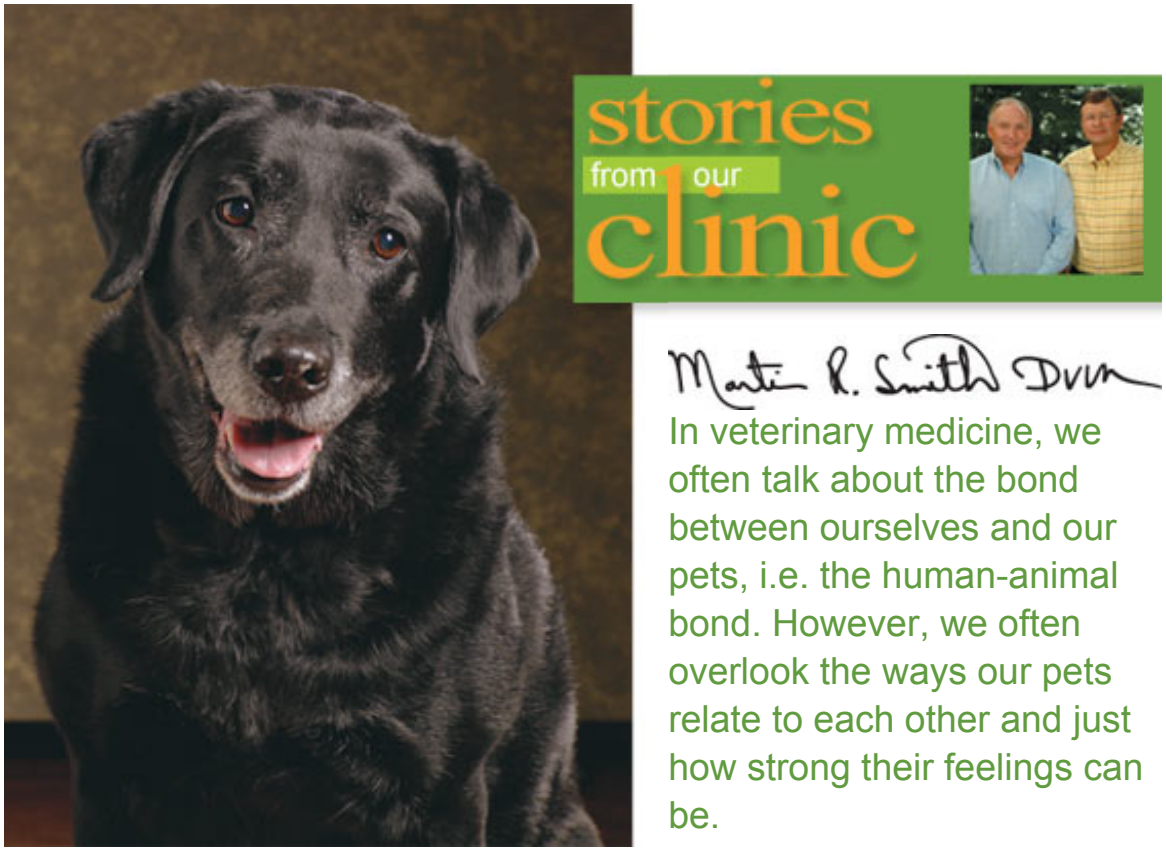

In veterinary medicine, we often talk about the bond between ourselves and our pets, i.e. the human-animal bond. However, we often overlook the ways our pets relate to each other and just how strong their feelings can be.

Several years ago I had a client with two black Labrador retrievers, both spayed females and littermates. Every night, they would lie on each side of the owner's recliner while he spent the evening reading a book.

They were all progressing in years; the owner was in his upper sixties and the dogs were approaching ten. One day, one of the female labs, named Edie, was brought in to us because, according to the owner, lumps were popping up all over her body.

In Labradors, benign growths in the skin are common and are usually either sebaceous cysts (normal oil glands of the skin that are impacted) or fatty tumors (called lipomas). Neither is usually of any great concern and both are easily dealt with. However, in this particular case, the cause was obvious and of great concern. Each of the masses were in the same location as the peripheral lymph nodes. This could be a response to an infection, but a needle biopsy showed the cause to be a malignant form of cancer of the lymph nodes, referred to as lymphosarcoma.

Treatment options for this disease at that time included chemotherapy, which was expensive, rough on the patient, and sometimes difficult to monitor. Another option was the common steroid prednisone. This usually gave the patient 1-2

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months, during which the animal usually felt very good. It was easy to administer and economical for the owner. The owner and I decided on the latter course, and for six weeks the masses shrank away. Edie was active, full of energy and seemed to be feeling good.

But, as with all these cases, the disease reached a point where the medicine lost its ability to control the cancer, and Edie quickly went downhill. The owner then made the decision to euthanize her.

The owner brought Edie into our clinic to be euthanized and then cremated. He would have preferred to bury her at home, but it was the middle of winter in Northern Wisconsin. The ground was frozen for several feet, so a grave could not be dug. That day he took home only her collar to remember her by.

For the next month, the remaining lab did not lie by her master, but rather she chose to remain in the kitchen. The owner asked me about this. Why did the only other member of the household seem to be ignoring him? I explained that I had seen other dogs apparently grieve the loss of a companion.

The dog's behavior continued for a few more weeks. One day, the man needed to get some tools to take care of routine household repairs. He went into the kitchen and reached into the tool drawer to gather his tools. This drawer was just above the spot where the lab had chosen to lay for the previous two months. As the man reached into the drawer for a hammer, the lab jumped in front of him and grabbed her littermate's collar in her mouth and started whining as she held it. It had been placed in the drawer the day her canine friend didn't return home. The man, seeing the reaction, in his own words, "broke down and cried like a baby." When he told me the story, I was amazed by the dog's actions and for how long she had remained vigilant to the memories of her littermate. It certainly went against the idea that animals have a short attention span and also showed how the remaining dog associated the smell of an inanimate object like a collar with her absent friend.

For the remainder of their years together, that collar sat on the end table by the man's recliner. His single canine friend was also there, lying by his side, and I believe she also felt the presence of her sister.

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