

# Rx *for* YOUR DOG

## *Three area veterinarians offer advice for taking in "man's best friend."*

by Clarke C. Jones

**T**housands of years ago, the first wild canine crossed over the divide of fear that separated it from man. The relationship that resulted when the dog first began sharing its space with humans and, in turn, allowed its subjugation to the human race has been a benefit to all mankind. Those domesticated dogs not only offered an early warning system for human encampments, but also acted as beasts of burden. An example, the ancient Basenji of Central Africa is thought to have assisted men in hunting game.

The evolution of the dog-human relationship is well documented. From the taming of ancient dogs, we now have over 150 breeds recognized by the American Kennel Club. Dogs have been bred selectively to improve the traits that fit particular needs of man. We have working dogs that herd sheep and cattle, dogs that provide security and rescue, and hunting dogs bred for specific tasks—whether it is pointing and retrieving game, or dogs that flush and chase game.

As man evolved from a hunter-gatherer to an agrarian and city dweller, dog breeds changed as well. Breeds became smaller or larger as man's desires or needs may have required.



*Dr. McFadden checks out an appreciative patient as part of a wellness exam.*

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It appears, however, that in instances where certain breeds have long been removed from a socialized pack, a form of pack mentality still remains. Some dogs seem happiest when they understand their place in a home environment, similar to experiencing a pack situation. Here, the human adults in the family may represent the Alpha male and female. It has also been noted that many dogs desire—and even require—a certain amount of attention. This may or may not correlate to a dog's behavior when it is reunited with the adult or other family members after being left alone for a period of time, such as during family errands.

Because humans have taken over what some consider the Alpha role of dogs—whether by design or by default—when we bring a puppy or dog into our home we ought to be aware of just what we are taking on.

I interviewed three veterinarians from the Richmond area: Dr. Owen C. McFadden, owner and hospital director of the Midlothian Animal Clinic; Dr. Steven R. Escobar, of the Springfield Veterinary Center in Richmond; and Dr. Thomas A. Carroll, who practices at the Village Veterinary Service in Amelia and the Nature Veterinary Center in South Hill. Sixty to seventy-five percent of their business is devoted to dog issues, and two of the three veterinarians are avid hunters. They are well qualified to answer the question I posed: "What do veterinarians think is important when bringing a canine into the home?"

*As a veterinarian, what do you think new dog owners should know and understand when purchasing a family dog?*

*Dr. McFadden:*

They should know and understand the responsibility they are undertaking. The responsibilities of ownership are just beginning when the dog is brought home. Besides the basics of providing food, water, and shelter, a dog will require preventive medical

care, including wellness examinations, vaccinations, heartworm and flea and tick prevention.

*Dr. Escobar:*

Prospective owners would serve themselves and their families well if they researched the breed of dog they want to bring home. Thought should be given to the age of any children in the household and the space available to the dog. The exercise needs of the particular breed are very important.

You can nip aggressiveness and dominance problems before they start by being a better educated pet owner. I see so many good dogs that have behavioral problems because the owner had not understood, or even cared about, what is involved in raising a pup. If more prospective owners would do a bit of homework by inquiring of their vets and breeders, there would be less dogs ending up in shelters.

*Pet health insurance seems to be a hot topic lately. What is your opinion about obtaining medical insurance for your pet?*

*Dr. McFadden:*

I think it is a wise investment. It is readily available and not as expensive as you might think. Your dog's good health will allow him to live longer; therefore, your pet's care will be an ongoing investment.

*What are the most common problems people have with dogs and how can they prevent them?*

*Dr. Carroll:*

Behavioral problems, such as housebreaking and chewing inappropriate things inside the house, are what most dog owners have to deal with. Knowing the idiosyncrasies of a particular breed could save the owner a great deal of problems. Some dogs may do well left alone for extended periods of time and some breeds can be very destructive when left alone, even for a very short time. Research

the breed to make sure there is a match with your lifestyle and living space and the particular dog you wish to own.

*Housebreaking always seems to be an issue for dog owners. Any tips?*

*Dr. Carroll:*

A dog owner should understand the proper correction techniques and the value of consistency when training a dog. The internet is a good source for helping the dog owner through this. Most dogs have a desire to fit into a unit, but the new dog owner must understand that it may take a couple of weeks for the dog to understand what is expected. The owner must be willing to put in the time. Be patient and be consistent. Consistency as to when you feed your dog, when you take it out for a walk, and when you correct it helps the dog learn what is expected much faster.

*Are there different health issues between a large dog and a smaller dog?*

*Dr. Escobar:*

While small dogs tend to live longer than larger dogs, small dogs seem to



*Conditioning your dog before hunting season begins will help prevent injuries.*

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have more cardiovascular and dental issues. If you want a mastiff or great dane, know from the start that your relationship with those types of dogs is historically shorter than with a dog like a chihuahua.

*Dr. McFadden:*

Golden retrievers as a breed tend to be allergy prone and susceptible to cancer. Small dogs such as pugs and bull dogs may have respiratory problems. Very active, deep-chested dogs can have a propensity for bloat.

#### ***What is bloat?***

*Dr. McFadden:*

It is gastric dilatation and torsion (twist) of the stomach, and can be fatal if not treated quickly. Bloating often occurs when a dog is fed and then becomes very active after having minimal time to digest its food. It can also happen if you are out hunting and it's hot and you give your dog too much water, trying to cool him off, and then go right back to hunting again. A dog running with a gallon of water sloshing around its stomach could experience this condition.

#### ***In a hunting situation, how much water is enough to give your dog and feel it is safe to continue high activity?***

*Dr. McFadden:*

A lot depends on the dog, but two cups of water may be enough. You certainly do not want your dog to become dehydrated, but use common sense. It is also important to give your dog a breather. Don't forget hypoglycemia; give him a snack as well. Dogs may look happy running and hunting, but if you and your dog have been lying around all summer and are not in shape, both of you could wind up with some type of injury.

#### ***How can people avoid injuries to their dogs if they own breeds that are very active?***

*Dr. Carroll:*

If you are a hunter or run field or agility trials, one of the things you should do is to look at your dog as an athlete. If you have played any sport, you know the importance of conditioning and being in shape. If your hunting dog chases game, it is very important to make sure its pads are toughened before the start of hunting season. Foot injuries can put your dog out of commission for weeks and it isn't necessary. Hunt clubs could serve themselves well if they would invite a vet to review their kennel operation. It's a good way for a club to get first-hand information on how to improve and maintain the health of their dogs.

*Dr. McFadden:*

Owners can minimize a dog's susceptibility to injury or illness by maintaining their dogs in good physical shape through diet and exercise, annual examinations and vaccinations, as well as routine intestinal parasite de-worming, heartworm prevention, and flea and tick control. Injuries are often chance accidents, but use common sense. Don't put your dog in unnecessary, risky situations.

#### ***What are some of the advances you have seen in the last ten years in veterinary medicine?***

*Dr. Escobar:*

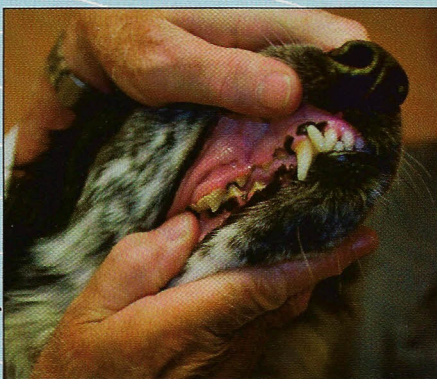
Ultrasound, MRI, and CT scans are used more today to help discover and locate diseases. The images from

these medical devices assist the vet to a much greater degree than the X-ray machines we had to rely upon years ago. We are able to find cancers, brain and spinal cord injuries, and other problems more quickly and with a greater degree of accuracy.

#### ***Besides skin diseases, what other problems are prevalent among dogs?***

*Dr. Escobar:*

Obesity. Thirty years ago maybe thirty percent of dogs had an obesity problem. Now, seventy percent of dogs seem to have this problem. Ironically, I believe it has to do with the so-called "improved" quality of dog food we are feeding dogs. Thirty years ago there was one major brand of dry dog food that had fillers and fiber in it. A competitive dog food manufacturer presented a concept of a high-caloric dog food that would enable the dog owner to feed his/her dog less food volume. The theory was the dog owner could give the dog a better quality food, but because of the higher caloric content, the dog would need *less* of it, thereby saving the dog owner money. However, the dog still *seems* hungry and the owner, looking at the small amount of food in the dog bowl, believes he can't be helping the dog, so he begins to give the dog the same portion of food as he did before. If the dog is taking in higher calories and there is no increase in an exercise regimen, the dog may begin to put on weight.



*Proper diet and care lead to healthy teeth.*



*Checking for mites and other ear conditions is part of a wellness visit.*



*How do you prepare a dog owner for the time when he or she may have to put their dog down?*

*Dr. Escobar:*

First thing is—you do not judge the owner's decision. Some owners cannot let go and others are able to accept the reality that the dog's quality of life has deteriorated to the degree that it is in pain, and is suffering. You explain as best as you can what the dog has to live with each day, but in the end it is the client's decision.

*Dr. Carroll:*

I never recommend euthanasia but I do explain to the client, as best as I can, what pain or discomfort the dog may be experiencing. I also explain what the prognosis is for the dog and treatment options and how effective or lasting these treatments may be. In the end, it is the owner who must make the decision.

*Dr. Mc Fadden:*

This is a really tough situation. It is not easy for the owner, and no matter how many times doctors have had to perform this procedure, it is not easy for *them*. A lot of veterinarians are dog owners, so most have a sense of what a dog owner is going through. In cases where you are dealing with an animal that has been a part of the family for 10 to 15 years, it can be emotionally grueling. Grief counseling is part of our training.

There is a common denominator found in each of the doctors interviewed—the compassion each has for the health of a dog. As one of the veterinarians put it, "Some people think they have a right to own a dog, and maybe they do—but their right does not end with ownership. With ownership comes *responsibility*." □

*Clarke C. Jones is a freelance writer who spends his spare time with his black Lab, Luke, hunting up good stories. You can visit Clarke and Luke on their website at [www.clarkecjones.com](http://www.clarkecjones.com).*

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