

AUTOPSIES

An important aspect of knowledge involves causes of death. We rarely think about which circumstances call for an autopsy, because we don't want to think about our doggy friends dying. The loss of a dog is a time of great distress, and a time when it's difficult to think clearly. That's why it's important to discuss with your veterinarian what can or should be done before the need arises.

If a dog dies as the result of a severe injury or if the cause of death is obvious, an autopsy will not reveal useful information. In most older dogs, if the systems are aging and failing, the exact cause of death may not be critical information. But an autopsy can reveal important information if the death was sudden and unexpected, especially in an apparently healthy dog; if poisoning is suspected; if the dog had been treated for a heart, kidney, neurological or other systemic dysfunction; or if relatives died with similar symptoms or from unknown causes. If there's a question about the cause of death, an autopsy may be appropriate.

Knowing why the dog died won't bring it back, but I hope the following cases illustrate why this information is nevertheless very important.

1. A male from my first litter started seizing at 9 months. I tried all available tests and treatments, to no avail. Just before his first birthday he had a series of such intense seizures that brain damage resulted, and he was euthanized. The autopsy revealed a gap about the size of a quarter in his brain that had apparently grown as he did, allowing fluid to collect as it got larger and causing the seizures. I was reassured that it was a birth anomaly, not a genetic defect that might recur in my breeding program, I had done everything possible for him, and that nothing would have changed the outcome.

2. Several years ago my dog was poisoned at a show. He was alive when I got him to a vet, but they couldn't save him. The vet said he had experience with poisonings, and this dog behaved as if it had been poisoned with strychnine. I drove the 11 hours home with my best buddy in a box and immediately buried him. I should have had tissue samples taken so there would have been proof of the poisoning, but I didn't because I was so distraught.

3. A person called me looking for a puppy because their 5-year old male had just died suddenly. They said he had no known health problems. He came running in from the fenced backyard, dropped over in what appeared to be a short seizure, and died. They suspected poison, but didn't do an autopsy. If he had been poisoned, would it be safe to send a puppy to that home before they eliminated the source of the poison? If he had a heart attack or other sudden systemic failure, his breeder should be told to determine if it was a genetic problem, so the dog's parents could be screened or removed from breeding programs.

Discuss the when and why of autopsies with your vet before the need arises. Depending on what information is being sought, tissue samples or the entire body may be sent to a laboratory or research facility, which may not be able to return the remains to you. If death is sudden and you're unsure what to do, ask the vet to hold the body until you can make a rational decision.

Know your options and weigh them when you can think clearly. Your peace of mind and maybe the future health of our breed depends on the decision.

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