

Both Ends of the Leash

Not Tonight-- I Have a Paw Ache: That suddenly cranky pup could be suffering from undiagnosed pain

Patricia B. McConnell

This is a column about pain as a cause of behavioral problems. It seems intuitively obvious that pain, and the fear of it, could cause the same problematic responses in dogs as it does in people. The idea that pain is a precursor to bad canine behavior – growling or nipping, for example – is based on sound biological principles. (I'm talking about dogs here, but surely you've done your own share of growling when you felt bad.) Why, then, is pain often the last thing people think of when they hear a Border Collie growl or see a Cocker Spaniel snap?

It's not that folks don't suspect physical problems as an explanation for their dog's behavior. If I had a dollar for every person who speculated that his aggressive dog had a brain tumor, I'd be a wealthy woman. And it's not that educated owners don't consider that a physiological dysfunction – a faulty thyroid, for example – could be the cause and have their dogs checked out by veterinarians. But pain? Simple, old fashioned, ouch-my-neck-hurts pain? Not so much.

Let me give you an example from my case files. A few years ago a client (I'll call her Mary) brought in her dog to be evaluated. Cody was a brown, lumpy mix of a thing, and he'd become increasingly unreliable around people over the previous few months. First, he had growled at a visitor, but over time, he had escalated to biting. In fact, he had bitten Mary that very morning as she reached toward him to clip on his leash. She held out her arm so that I could witness the damage he'd done. I could see dull red



streaks on her forearm where his teeth had scraped the skin, and purple and blue bruises swelled under the scratches.

“It's not that he hurt my arm so much, it's that he's always been so good. I could do anything to him, and so could my nephews and the vet. I don't think I ever heard him growl until this started a few months ago. And now I can't trust him anymore.” She paused and her face began to crumple. “I don't know what to do.” For a while, the only sounds in the office were Mary's quiet crying and Cody's soft panting.

After asking Mary a raft of questions, I began to work with Cody, and it didn't take long for a pattern to emerge. If I kept my hands to myself, Cody was relaxed and happy. If I reached toward his neck, he stiffened and began to growl. This is a common reaction of a neophobic dog who is afraid of strangers, but Cody had been a social butterfly until a few months before, and as far as Mary knew, he hadn't been traumatized by a stranger.

I asked Mary if she'd taken Cody to his veterinarian. “Oh no,” she said. “He's fine; you should see him play ball and run around in the woods. He couldn't possibly be in any pain – he just charges around the yard!”

I didn't think of it then, but I could've asked her, “And how do you think I'm doing?” All afternoon, I'd been cheerful and pleasant and full of energy. In the morning, I'd carried slopping water buckets and heavy hay bales for the sheep, and had run around in the yard with my dogs. I was a veritable picture of a healthy person. Only one problem – my neck was

killing me, and the pain was so tiring that I'd snapped at the dogs (well, not literally). But unless you knew I was uncomfortable, you wouldn't have known why I was short-tempered. Pain is a funny thing. It affects each of us in different ways and at different times. You can be fine one evening and miserable the next. You can be kind and patient with one person, and lose your temper with another.

At the end of our session, I suggested to Mary that she talk to her veterinarian, and good for her – she took Cody to the clinic soon after. She called me a week later.

“I can't believe it! Cody's not growling or snapping anymore. My vet found that he had injured his neck and was in a lot of pain. He had a chiropractic adjustment, is on medication and is doing wonderfully!”

This neat, happy story sounds almost too good to be true. It is true, but it's also worth noting that it's rare for things to work out so tidily. I'd love to tell you that all my clients find that their dogs were grumpy only because they had torn ligaments or pulled muscles. Sorry, that's not how it works out. The fact is, most behavioral problems are not medical ones; more often, dogs who growl at strangers because they are afraid of them are not ill, they are fearful. Just as dogs who guard their food bowls and snap at their guardians aren't sick, they're just, well, guarding their food bowls. However, if a dog like Cody, a long time model citizen, suddenly starts behaving in new and negative ways, it's time to talk to the vet.

This column is not just for people who own dogs. I'm also addressing these remarks to veterinarians. I say that with the respect due to a profession that has extended and improved the lives of at least a gazillion dogs. However, over the last 20 years, I can't tell you how many dogs I've seen who were cleared by their vets as being “fine,” only to learn later that the dogs were in pain. Also, I want to be very clear here: I am not a vet. I'm a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist who sends some of my clients back to their veterinary clinics or their animal chiropractors for another look to see if their dog just might be in pain.

You can't blame the medical profession for struggling with this issue. It's notoriously hard to diagnose pain. It doesn't show up on x-rays or MRIs or CAT

scans. You can't get a positive blood test for “pain.” It's a completely subjective experience that can come and go, and many of us (much less our dogs) aren't always honest about it. I remember my mother in her last years, complaining vociferously to her daughters about how much pain she was in – except during appointments with her doctor, when she smiled and laughed and reported that she was “doing great!” I suspect that happens on examining tables in vet clinics too – our dogs grinning and wagging until they come home and get grumpy again under the dining room table.

In my experience, pain may not be a common cause of growling, snapping or just being a jerk when Aunt Polly comes to visit, but it deserves consideration. Think about it before you start speculating about brain tumors or attributing complicated motivations to your dog's bad temper.*” I'd write more, but I've got a headache.

* Don't ever, ever give your dog pain medication without talking to your veterinarian. Some common human pain medications can harm or even kill your dog.

Patricia B. McConnell, PhD, is an animal behaviorist and ethologist and an adjunct professor in Zoology at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, as well as the author of numerous books on behavior and training.

This column was originally printed in The Bark Magazine, Issue No. 49, Jul-Aug 2008. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without written permission.