

Marie's Den

When Canine Misbehavior is Medical

by Cate Kulak

It's the call animal rescuers dread: an animal at risk of losing their home due to a behavioral problem. Marie Joyner, Chief Operating Officer for Our Companions, received one of those calls; a black Labrador Retriever bit his owner. The Lab was taken by animal control to be quarantined and the family planned on euthanizing him after his quarantine period was over. This particular call took Marie by surprise, since the Lab had no history of aggression.

Joyner's first step was to bring the dog to a veterinarian for a full clinical exam, blood work-up including thyroid levels, and a 4DX blood test for Heartworm, Lyme and two other tick-borne diseases. "A thorough health exam is key when dealing with aggressive behavior," says Joyner, "because training cannot work when there is a medical cause for the behavior being addressed." The goal was to uncover and treat an underlying medical issue possibly causing the Lab's aggression, or rule out the health factor and address the aggression as purely behavioral.

Pain and discomfort are understandable causes of aggression, but there are other causes of aggression that hold their roots in medical issues. Hormone imbalances, tick-borne viruses, and even head trauma and brain tumors can cause a dog to become aggressive. Once identified, many of these issues can be eased through medical treatment or naturopathic remedies. Some owners, including Joyner herself, use herbal supplements to address specific issues, though she stresses the importance of full disclosure to veterinarians when any natural remedies are used.

Joyner was aware of research that demonstrated aggression can be a symptom of tick-borne illnesses (as opposed to aggression resulting from the pain that usually serves as the primary symptom), so she insisted on the full range of tests including screening for tick borne illnesses. All of the dog's tests came back normal, except for the thyroid test, which was low, yet still within a normal range. Joyner's veterinarian ordered a different, more sensitive test, which confirmed the Lab indeed had hypothyroidism.

Choosing a veterinarian who is receptive to the connection between medical issues and behavior problems, is up-to-date on research, and supports positive reinforcement training is a necessary part of determining the root cause of canine behavioral problems. Another key element is maintaining continuity of care. "I encourage my clients to see the same veterinarian, even in multi-vet practices, to develop a good relationship so they know your pet and can help identify changes in your pet's health and behavior," said Joyner.

Aggression isn't the only reason for animals being abandoned due to behavior problems. Housetraining issues are also often cited. There are several medical issues that can cause a regression in housetraining: bladder or urinary tract infection, colitis, urine crystals, or even small seizures, which can be diagnosed and treated. If any of these problems exist, behavioral training will be ineffective without proper medical treatment.

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As a first step in addressing canine behavioral problems, Joyner suggests pet owners rule out any medical problems that can be the cause.

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Considering 3-4 million pets are euthanized in United States' shelters every year, there is no exaggerating the importance of using every tool available to make sure your pet doesn't become a statistic. Luckily for the black Lab, he was in the right hands. Once his hypothyroidism was properly diagnosed and treated, he found a new forever home and a happy ending.