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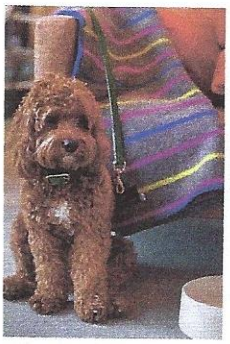

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"Where does it hurt?"

Ask a Dynamic Dog Practitioner!

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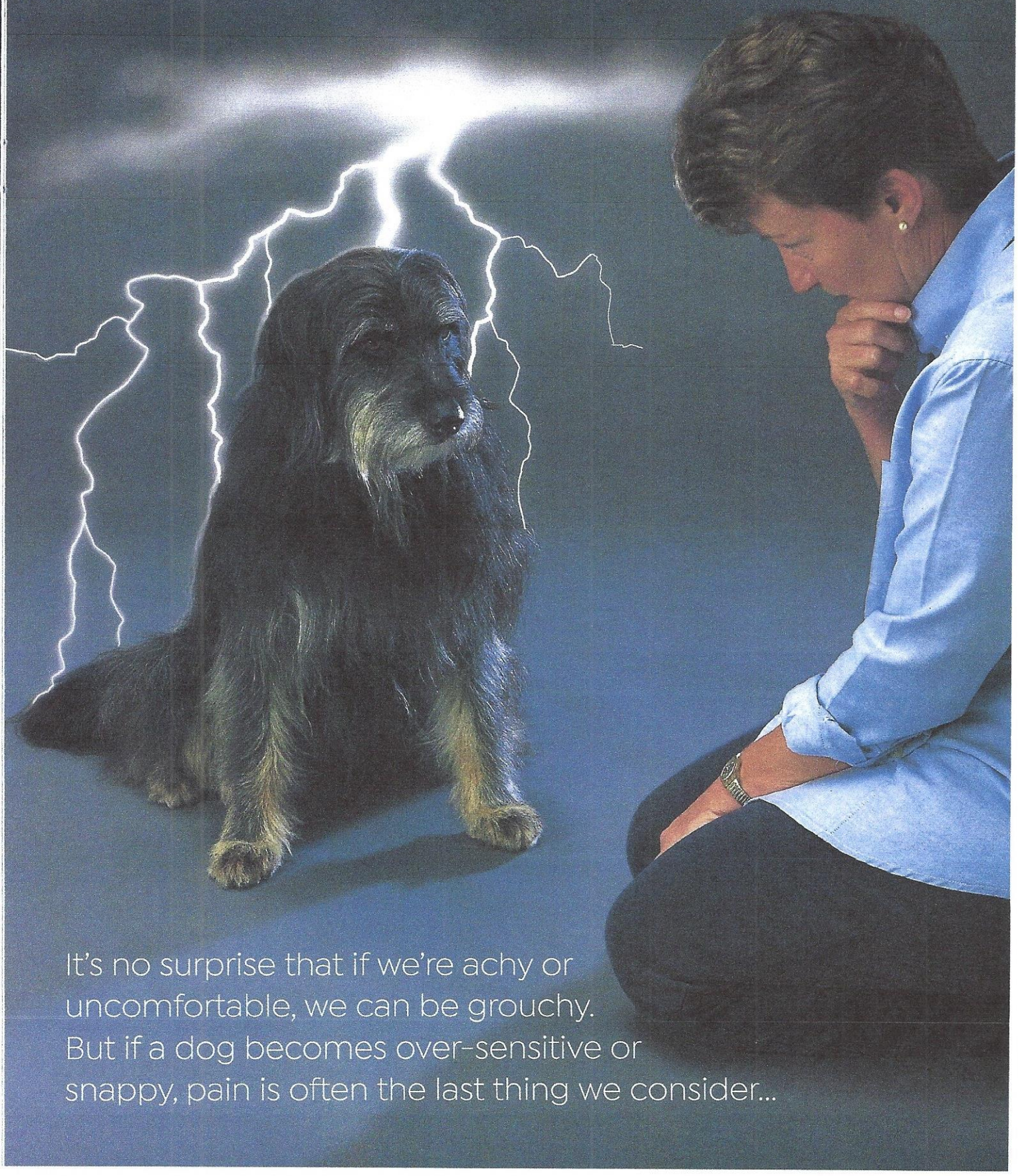
Words CLARE WILLIAMS

Pain in the neck or pain in the neck?



It's no surprise that if we're achy or uncomfortable, we can be grouchy. But if a dog becomes over-sensitive or snappy, pain is often the last thing we consider...

Have you ever thought that your dog might be a pain in the neck because he has a pain in his neck?

There is a growing understanding that pain or discomfort can significantly affect a dog's behaviour. The seminal paper by Professor Daniel Mills and a group of veterinary behaviourists entitled 'Pain and Problem Behavior in Dogs and Cats' found that a painful condition was suspected to be contributing to the unwanted behaviour in between 23% and 82% of the behaviour cases referred to them. These conditions included musculoskeletal, neurological and gastrointestinal problems.

Dig deeper and we learn that a whole range of unwanted behaviours can be linked to pain, from dog-to-dog or dog-to-human defensiveness through to resource guarding, attention-seeking behaviour, pica (eating non-food items) and compulsive-type behaviours, such as excessive licking.

This presents a whole new dimension to be considered in canine behaviour cases – and one that is not always easy to unravel. Dogs are masters at working through pain, partly because they need to continue to perform everyday functions, but also because they want to please us – if they are asked to jump in the car, they will. Moreover, adrenaline can mask pain in an exciting situation, so a dog in pain may still want to play or go for a walk. All this makes it hard for caregivers to tell if their dog is in discomfort.

The detection process is sometimes just as difficult for our hardworking vets, who are limited to a short consultation with a stressed dog whose pain response is probably being masked by the stress hormones or adrenaline.

The big question is how we bridge that gap between a suspicion that the dog may be in pain and providing the information to the dog's vet to enable them to make a diagnosis or propose a trial of pain relief. Such a trial will help assess whether the unwanted behaviours improve with pain medication, which would then suggest there may be some underlying discomfort.

Our dogs give us so many clues, not just in their behaviour but also in how they use their bodies when they are static or moving. For example, if a human has a painful hip or knee, they will most likely adjust their body to bear more weight on the opposite side, and the same is true of dogs. Sarah Fisher of Animal Centred Education (ACE) started the ball rolling for me in her Dog Detective course in 2018, using the now well-established ACE Free Work. She showed how much you can learn from quietly observing our dogs, how they arrange their limbs when they stand, sit or lie down, how they move, what surfaces they choose to walk over and which ones they avoid, the directions they choose to move in, and even how small changes in their coat pattern can indicate an underlying problem.

I was able to take this to the next level when Gemma Hodson of All About the Dog launched her unique Dynamic Dog Practitioner course in April 2021. The course offers a deep dive into canine anatomy, conformation, gait and posture analysis, pain, and its impact on behaviour, and shows how to present your observations to a dog's vet in a way that would facilitate their investigations. The fourth and final month is spent completing five cases studies, using behaviour cases where pain is a suspected contributor.

The role of a Dynamic Dog Practitioner is never to diagnose, but to provide as much relevant

BEHAVIOURS POSSIBLY INFLUENCED BY PAIN

DEFENSIVE

Dogs may choose defensive behaviours to avoid being touched in painful areas. The behaviour can be anything from mild avoidance to biting, usually targeted at the hand. It can occur not just when stroking the dog, but also when putting on the collar or harness and when grooming.

DISTANCE CREATING

Dogs in pain may prefer to keep humans and other dogs at a distance to avoid any contact. This often happens when the dog is lying down, and can sometimes exacerbate resource guarding if the dog fears they may be handled to be moved away.

ANXIOUS

Pain can make dogs more anxious. They can become hypervigilant, both around the home and when out, worried about factors in the environment that may exacerbate their pain. This can include boisterous dogs, strangers, uneven ground and walking on slippery wooden floors in the home.

REPETITIVE

Repetitive, 'compulsive' types of behaviours may actually be a sign of pain in a dog. For example star gazing, fly snapping or excessive licking of surfaces may indicate gastro-intestinal discomfort. Behaviours such as constant digging, eating non-food items (pica) or being 'always on the go' may be redirected activities for dogs with musculoskeletal pain who struggle to settle. Excessive licking or chewing of a particular limb can also be a result of pain, but, due to the complex workings of the dog's nervous system, not necessarily in that particular limb. Repeated stretching after rest or during exercise may suggest musculoskeletal or gastro-intestinal discomfort.

CLINGY

Like humans, dogs in pain seek comfort from the familiar. A caregiver may find that their dog becomes more attached to them than usual and may develops separation issues.

NOISE SENSITIVITY

Musculoskeletal pain can be the cause of new noise sensitivities, particularly in older dogs. Also, the muscle tension and sudden movement caused by being startled by a loud noise may aggravate any painful areas, making a dog more sensitive to similar loud noises.

STUBBORN

Dogs coping with pain may mistakenly be described as 'stubborn'. Pain may mean they become reluctant to exercise as much, less responsive to sit or get up or they may simply refuse to enter an area with a slippery floor.

Sources: Dynamic Dog Practitioner Course, Animal Centred Education (ACE), Pain and Problem Behavior in Cats and Dogs – Daniel S Mills et al, Noise Sensitivities in Dogs: An Exploration of Signs in Dogs with and without Musculoskeletal Pain Using Qualitative Content Analysis – Ana Luisa lopes Fagundes et al

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Clockwise from top left: Ruby chooses to sit with her right hind leg positioned out to the side, rather than placing it in line with the foreleg as she does on the left; Wyatt chooses to lie with his hind legs stretched out between his forelegs rather than with his hind legs bent at the knee, as you would normally expect; Piper has an unusual coat pattern, which is smooth along the top and fluffier at the sides. Also, the coat lies in a different direction about two-thirds of the way down her back; Bodie sometimes sits or stands with his right fore paw turned in, causing his elbow to rotate out.

information and evidence as possible to help the vet with their diagnostic process.

In a behaviour case, the Dynamic Dog assessment process begins with a 90-minute consultation with the caregivers to learn about the dog from their perspective. This includes the medical history, any changes in the dog over time – things they can no longer do or struggle with, how the dog reacts to being touched or having a harness put on, even down to how the dog stoops to poop and whether they can maintain that position. The caregiver is also asked if there is anything that the dog does regularly that may seem odd, such as stretching every time they get up or constantly licking a paw.

This is followed by an analysis of photos and videos of the dog, specified by the practitioner, and usually taken by the caregiver. Photos tell a lot about how the dog arranges their body when still. Do they shift their weight to one side or place one hind leg to the side or behind them when they stand? Do they prefer to sit with one hind leg sticking out or both hindlegs through their forelegs? Do they curl up or stretch out when they sleep?

Photos are also useful for highlighting changes in the texture, colour or pattern of the coat, which can be supporting evidence of issues in that area. Ear symmetry is also a useful clue, one ear higher than the other can suggest greater tension on that side of the body.

VIDEO EVIDENCE

Videos, especially when slowed down, enable observation of how the dog moves, identifying areas of stiffness, particularly along the spine, as well as the distribution of their weight across all four legs, where they place their feet (such as putting the opposite hindleg towards the centre of the body for support when the painful hindleg is on the ground), and if they can move comfortably in all paces. Some dogs in pain find it much easier to trot than walk, as walking requires all four limbs to move in succession whereas trotting has two diagonally opposite limbs hitting the ground at any one time, providing greater support.

PAIN REPORT

Videos of the dog transitioning into the sit or down and how they get up again are also reviewed and assessed. It can be that a dog with a weakness in his hindquarters may lever himself up from lying down with his front legs rather than push up with his hindlegs. Videos of climbing stairs or jumping in and out of the car can also provide valuable information, as can a video of the dog urinating and defecating. Although embarrassing to film, a dog may place one foreleg in between his hindlegs in the 'poop stoop' suggesting he is not comfortable putting his weight on the other foreleg or may move about mid poop.

A huge amount of information is analysed and distilled into a concise two-page report for the vet, acknowledging the limited amount of time a busy vet will have available to read any reports. The summary provides an overview of the caregiver's observations, the Dynamic Dog practitioner's assessment, and the key areas of concern, supported by relevant marked-up photos and a very short compilation video.

From here the investigations begin, with the caregiver, vet, Dynamic Dog practitioner, and other relevant professionals ideally all working together as the dog's support team.

Pain and discomfort should always be considered as a possible cause for a dog's unwanted behaviour and learning to identify the signs of pain is going to become a vital new skill for both caregivers and professionals as we learn more about the links between pain and unwanted behaviour.

To find a Dynamic Dog Practitioner or to find out more about the Dynamic Dog Practitioner course, visit www.allaboutthedogtherapy.co.uk/dynamicdog