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"Joskin and Cassie" - Labrador Blood Donors



Rusty

In the field of human medicine, giving blood transfusions to patients is a routine procedure. Hospitals have large stores of donated blood at the ready, to use whenever it may be required. In veterinary medicine, we do not have quite as many willing volunteers, so it is not so easy to keep stores of blood.

Generally, if a blood transfusion is required, a suitable donor is found and the blood is taken then and there. My Labrador, Joskin, and my Siamese cat, Ernie, have both been regular blood donors for the practice.

Because of the practical difficulties in taking blood from animals, we tend to only use transfusions in exceptional circumstances. This week, however, those "exceptional circumstances" arose twice in two days!

Firstly, a transfusion was required for a severely anaemic dog. Thus, as usual, I fetched Jos from my house, and we took blood from him.

In dogs, this is done with no sedation, from the jugular vein in the neck. The donor dog has blood tests performed first to ensure they are fit and well, and can safely donate. If it is the recipient dog's first transfusion, cross-matching the blood to ensure the two dogs are the same blood group is not essential. This is because - unlike humans - dogs do not have antibodies which attack the blood cells of a different blood type. If the same dog requires a second transfusion, however, they MUST be blood typed, because the first transfusion can cause these antibodies to form, so if incompatible blood is given a second time, a fatal transfusion reaction can occur.

In cats, these antibodies DO exist in some cats, so it is potentially dangerous to transfuse a cat without matching the donor and recipient blood groups first. Thus, when we look for a suitable donor cat, we also check their blood group. Donor cats must also be checked for feline leukaemia virus (FeLV) and feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV). Not surprisingly, cat donors DO require sedation, and they are also put on a drip to replace the blood volume removed.

Secondly, 2 days later, a dog required a transfusion to provide her with essential "clotting factors" that she did not have, to prevent her haemorrhaging during an operation to remove a tumour from her spleen. Obviously, I needed to find an alternative donor, as Jos had done his duty already that week!

This situation had never arisen before, so I racked my brains, and eventually decided to ring the Turner family, from Burbage, to ask if they would mind volunteering one of their three chocolate Labradors.

When searching for a blood donor, there are certain criteria we look at. The most important are size, general health and temperament. An ideal donor should be around 30Kg or heavier, but this must be lean weight (ie: they must not be obese). They should be fit and well, ideally 8 years or less, and not receiving any medication. They must not have travelled outside the UK (ie: on a Pet Passport).

A good temperament is essential, as the donor has to sit very still for about 5-10 minutes, whilst we insert a rather large needle into their neck! Fortunately, "Cassie" the chocolate Labrador fulfilled these criteria perfectly. My own dog, Joskin, is the most placid animal you could wish to meet, and actually wags his tail as we take blood from him. I thought it would be hard to find another dog as amenable as he is, but Cassie proved me wrong and was wonderfully co-operative.

Thus, our "blood shortage" problem was solved. However, Joskin is now 9 years old, and has whispered in my ear that he really should have retired by now! Hence we are appealing to dog owners in the Hinckley area to register their dogs as potential donors. We would be grateful if anyone who has a dog that meets the above criteria could contact the Fairfield surgery (01455 637642), so that we can keep your details on file. If used, your dog will get the benefit of receiving a full health check and screening blood tests before hand.

We would also like to hear from owners of potential cat donors. The criteria for cats is that they should be large cats (over 5Kg lean body weight), fit and well and under 8 years old. Temperament is slightly less important as sedation is used.

As a regular blood donor myself, I always feel proud to have "done my bit". Although our animal donors probably don't feel the same, the praise and treats they get afterwards more than make up for it!

Geraldine Forsythe BVSC CertSAM MRCVS

This article is available on the Fairfield Veterinary Centre web site at www.fairfield-vets.co.uk

You won't care how much we know - until you know how much we care