

PULSE

JESSIE SULLIVAN AND DR. STEPHEN GANTON
WITH DOGGIE BLOOD DONOR BUDDY



K-9 TRANSFUSIONS

Doggie blood donors save ailing pets

“**R**at poison stops a dog’s blood from clotting, so if we catch it fast enough we can make the dog vomit and treat it with vitamin K, but sometimes owners don’t know that the dog’s got into it for days then they need a transfusion,” says Jessie Sullivan, a registered animal health technician at Kelowna’s Fairfield Animal Hospital. Every year, dozens of dogs in the region require transfusions for surgery, poisoning, disease or trauma.

Buddy, a large, mixed breed, sits calmly on the table while Jessie and Dr. Ganton shave a small patch of fur on his neck and gently slip a needle into his jugular vein. During the 10-minute procedure, he will donate 450ml of blood that may help save another dog’s life. For his trouble, Buddy is showered with affection and just like human donors, enjoys a cookie and refreshment afterwards.

Until a year ago, staff relied

entirely on their own pets for blood donations. As the demand grew, they turned to their clientele. Within a few weeks of spreading the word, seven owners came forward to volunteer their pets. Now they have 12 regular donors and more on a waiting list. Each dog can give a maximum of four times per year. The demand for blood is frequent at the 24-hour hospital and they occasionally send it to other clinics. Each donation can be stored and used for up to 30 days. However, in some emergencies, an immediate transfusion with a fresh donation is a matter of life and death.

Since rat poison prevents blood from clotting, victims can develop uncontrolled internal bleeding without a transfusion of healthy blood. To make matters worse, the clotting factors in donated blood expire within 12 hours and, ideally, the doctors like to transfuse a new donation within two hours. In such emergencies, staff relies on their

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pets but when that is not possible, Jessie calls the volunteers. "We've called some people at 9 p.m. or later and they've been here within 15 minutes. It's really amazing to see their genuine concern."

With rumours of rat poisoned food in dog parks around the Central Okanagan, Fairfield always has a supply of blood available. Curious dogs have also been known to eat chocolate, pesticides, antifreeze, xylitol (an artificial sweetener), raisins, mushrooms and other toxins. As well, compared to other pets, dogs get more diseases including hemolytic anemia, an ailment shared by humans. An autoimmune response destroys red blood cells causing symptoms that range from mild to life threatening.

All dog donors receive a free annual blood panel workup to ensure that they are healthy. They are tested for heartworm, Lyme disease, blood type and organ function. "We look at their liver and kidneys to make sure they are strong enough to donate. It's probably not something people would do for a healthy, young dog," says Jessie. "It allows for early detection of diseases that may not be showing symptoms yet." Other benefits for owners are discounts at the hospital: 50 per cent on vaccines and 10 per cent on heartworm prevention medicine.

Eight major canine blood types have been identified, although veterinarians use two main categories: dog erythrocyte antigen (DEA) 1.1 negative and DEA 1.1 positive. Approximately 30 percent of dogs are DEA 1.1 negative and are universal donors. A DEA 1.1 negative dog should not receive positive blood; multiple transfusions can cause dangerous spikes in temperature and heart rate.

There is no breed-specific blood type, so Buddy could help a tiny chihuahua—and a few of its friends. —Lisa Harrison

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