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# High-tech healthcare

BY DIANA BOCCO

Should your dog have a kidney transplant? How about a hip replacement or heart surgery? Veterinary medicine has made amazing advances in the last few decades, but how do you determine when high-end medical procedures are viable for your own companion?

It was 30 years ago when Belinda's childhood dog, a Siberian husky, developed severe epilepsy. Her family had their beloved dog put to sleep because they were told nothing much could be done for him. Back then, euthanasia was the common answer to most grave health issues in dogs. But things have changed. Veterinarians can now often successfully treat almost every canine ailment, including serious conditions like heart disease, cancer and kidney failure.

## Big strides

"Veterinary medicine has progressed greatly in the past 20 years," says veterinarian Dr. Laurie S. Coger. Cutting edge technology, surgeries, diagnostics and other procedures are now routinely used by general practitioners and specialists alike. Many of these advances were once used only in human medicine, and include things like surgical lasers, digital radiography, pacemakers, advanced imaging such

as CT and MRI, targeted chemotherapy, stem cell therapy and more. "We also have more effective and multiple ways of managing disease," Dr. Coger adds. "These advances increase a dog's chances of fighting disease, and also can enhance quality of life."



Pacemakers for dogs can cost about \$6,000, a hip replacement can set you back about \$5,000, and chemotherapy can run several thousand dollars per session.



Take, for example, the case of Buddy, a dog with diabetes currently being treated by veterinarian Dr. Jonathan Woodman. "We've been treating him for diabetes since 2005," he says. "He is the longest living diabetic I've ever treated." Buddy's family has gone far above and beyond what most people would do for their dogs, including giving him surgery for the cataracts he developed shortly after initial diagnosis. Ultimately, Dr. Woodman believes it's his family's commitment to maintaining Buddy's insulin dosage, feeding him well, and taking care of every little health issue that comes up that has kept the dog alive. "They're in the office at least once every two weeks," he says.

Other dog lovers are embracing more radical treatments to keep their furry friends around longer. Pacemaker implants are becoming more common, as are hip replacements and stem cell therapy for arthritis. Even conditions like cancer and kidney failure are no longer necessarily death sentences – just like humans, dogs can now receive chemotherapy and radiation for cancer, and even kidney transplants.

### — It comes at a cost —

Of course, these high-tech procedures aren't cheap. Pacemakers for dogs can cost about \$6,000, a hip replacement can set you back about \$5,000, and chemotherapy can run several thousand dollars per session. Dr. Woodman estimates Buddy's family has spent around \$15,000 on his care over the last eight years.

These high costs also increase the frequency of what experts call "economic euthanasia" – putting an animal to sleep because the family cannot afford the cost of veterinary care. "Unfortunately, animals rely on the disposable income of our clients to pay for their care," says Dr. Woodman. "Most clients will do all they can, but frequently in expensive cases, we have a limit to what we can do. Some of the most expensive issues clients have to deal with are cancer treatments, which can run into tens of thousands of dollars."

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## Advances in *alternative medicine*

Alternative veterinary medicine is also advancing, both in technology – such as low level laser therapy and rehabilitation equipment – and in improved availability of high quality herbal, homotoxicological, nutraceutical and nutritional products. Modalities such as acupuncture, chiropractic, massage therapy, laser treatments, immunotherapy and nutritional therapy have become more commonplace, not only for supportive care but also when people are trying to improve the quality of life and prolong the longevity of ill or elderly dogs.

“In the mid-1970s, when I first started treating paralyzed animals with acupuncture, the hopeless cases were all I saw,” says veterinarian Dr. Ihor Basko. Now, he says, more and more people are coming to him for common problems, including hip pain, diarrhea and even behavioral issues.



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One way to get around this is by buying pet insurance. While much depends on the company and the policy you go with, in many cases, the insurance pays the majority of the treatment cost, and clients pay only a deductible and small co-payment, making it possible to move forward with treatments that would otherwise be impossible.

### Ethical concerns

The next question becomes one of ethics. When do you stop treating a dog and “let go”? For example, is it really worth putting an older dog through the ordeal of transplant surgery when the prognosis is uncertain and/or his natural lifespan is almost at an end anyhow? How much should your dog endure just so you can buy another few months to a year together? Be honest, and ask yourself what you’re really most worried about – your dog’s well being, or the thought of losing him?

On the other hand, if your dog is younger and otherwise healthy, and a transplant or course of chemo could save his life and give him many more good years, then it’s certainly worth doing all you can for him.

Buddy’s Family has gone far above and beyond what most people would do for their dogs, including giving him surgery for the cataracts he developed shortly after initial diagnosis.

Either way, experts believe it’s all about “quality” and not “quantity” of life. “Where to draw the line is something we deal with on a daily basis,” says Dr. Woodman. “Quite simply, there is no right or wrong answer to these questions in most cases.” If an animal is clearly suffering and there is no more to be done, then it’s usually pretty easy to make a decision.

Chances are, you’ll someday be faced with a serious medical problem in your dog. Whether you opt to do everything feasible to keep him with you as long as possible – or choose to let nature take its course while keeping him as comfortable as you can – it’s ultimately up to you. You’ll need to consider several factors – your dog’s age, condition, prognosis and potential life expectancy, the cost of treatment, and how much discomfort, or not, the therapy (or, conversely, living with the disease) will cause him. At the end of the day, try to do what’s best for your dog. 🐾