

Diagnostic Labs For Dogs

Is it cancer? This simple question is always associated with anxiety and foreboding for humans and dogs.

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Blood elements such as red blood cell numbers, size, shape, and hemoglobin concentrations are routinely evaluated. White blood cells likewise are accurately counted and described. Urine samples commonly provide important insight into the patient's metabolic activities; and data from the urine sample will reflect the status of the function of a number of organ systems.

Sometimes a single element of the urinalysis, such as the urine concentration (called specific gravity), will be the only clue to a patient's difficulties. Following that clue and evaluating other body chemistry functions, hormone levels, and organ activities will then contribute to an accurate diagnosis.

Veterinarian Dan Paretsky, of Eagle River, Wis., was recently presented with a young Golden Retriever that wasn't acting quite right. The dog's owner was almost apologetic about the visit, since the dog was not "really sick." Paretsky noticed a swollen lymph node in front of one shoulder and a slight, one-degree rise above the normal expected temperature. Otherwise the patient was normal upon physical exam.

But because the owner's intuition was respected as a valuable clue, and the fact that the subtle changes in the dog's attitude had been going on for weeks, the veterinarian decided to obtain cells from the lymph node via a fine needle aspirate. The cells were sent to the diagnostic lab along with a blood sample. Three days later the lab delivered a positive diagnosis of Lyme disease. Fortunately, analysis determined that the swollen lymph node was merely reacting to the Lyme bacteria, and was not cancerous. The dog recovered completely with a course of antibiotics, thanks in part to the early detection by a diagnostic lab.

Odds are that sometime during your dog's lifetime, a challenging health problem will arise. An estimated 75 percent of dogs over 10 years of age will eventually develop cancer. Responsible dog owners visit their veterinarian for all types of care, some minor and some major. The true detective work to sort out whether or not a seemingly trivial health problem really is inconsequential often entails the collection and analysis of blood, urine, and tissues. Sometimes on-the-spot analyses are done in-house. These rapid-answer tests are getting more diverse and accurate every year. In many situations, though, sending the specimens to a reference pathology laboratory is the most reliable source of information.

Veterinary diagnostic laboratories must meet certain standards to be certified. They receive requests for assistance from all sectors of the animal and human health arena: diagnostic tests for diseases of diverse species, from exotic birds to farm animals; toxicology reports on animal and plant specimens; virology testing for rabies and pox viruses. All are a part of most veterinary diagnostic laboratory duties.

Today's diagnostic tests, combined with the versatility of onsite and referral diagnostic laboratories, contribute greatly to arriving at a correct diagnosis. The veterinarian is then better equipped to get your dog back to optimum health as soon as possible.