

Veterinarian Saves Senior Dog from a Brain Tumor (Twice!)



I've spent a lot of time over the past few months lying on the floor weeping beside my 13-year-old Border Collie, Echo. She has always been particular about how she wants to be petted so I do my best to focus on her neck and belly but not her face – she doesn't like that.

I cry because she is sick with a brain tumor. I cry until my tear ducts are dry at seeing her slip away from the vibrant, beloved bossy, heart-of-my-family that she has been all these years. Up until May of this year, everywhere I went she was with me – just behind me, always keeping a watchful and loving protective eye on me.

I just want one more day where she can walk again ... to see her run again would be, at this point, unimaginable. And yet, I still want to see her run because she is a beautiful mover and she loves it so. She is the reason I have lived on large tracts on land for the past decade. I wanted her to have space to run to her heart's content. Seeing her happy expanded my own human heart and if I were to spend every dollar I had buying land for her to run on, so be it. There are far less honorable ways to go broke.

And all the while, of course, I desperately wanted more than one day. I wanted her health back. I've lost count how many times I knew in my heart over the three months since her diagnosis that it was her last day. I've never been happier in my life to be so wrong, so often.

As a professional canine behavior expert and trainer, I've shared the past 30 years with too many dogs to count – both my own dogs and my clients'. I fostered nearly 400 dogs and I have seen just about everything in terms of dog behavior and health.

Many of them became ill as they aged in spite of the very best food (I fed "high quality" kibble until the last few years though I have switched to fresh, homemade, species-appropriate meals) and the best veterinary care. I've lost countless dogs to cancer, senior dementia, liver, and kidney or pancreatic diseases. Several of our large breed dogs seemed fine on a walk one day and literally died within 24-hours from undiagnosed liver (or other) tumors. I am not over the shock of their quick demise still. I am not (and never will be) over the heartbreak of losing every single dog we've loved to an all-too early death.

So when my husband and I rushed Echo to the ER four months ago because she suddenly could not walk, we felt the end was inevitable for one of the sweetest souls we have ever known. All the years of losing dogs in their prime

sat foremost in our hearts and minds. We couldn't believe we were here yet again with someone who was so recently was able to trot a mile up and down the hills in our mountainous neighborhood in Utah. Echo had never been sick a day in her life. We have her brother, Radar, as well and he has always has been incredibly healthy, too. He still is going strong.

We waited for five hours with Echo at the ER to be seen. During that time she sat on the bed we brought her in on and looked at us with love and calmness. She couldn't walk or stand on her own and we were doing our best to stay strong for our girl, but our hearts were shattering. The veterinarian who did a full-body CT scan finally was able to see us. He first said that things looked good internally but he took a deep breath and told us: Echo had a brain tumor.

I won't bore you with the next several months of incredibly expensive veterinary care that drained our dear girl's strength and ate up our bank account. (I will advise you to get insurance on your animals as veterinarians can do amazing things these days but it can cost a lot of money.) I will share with you our very good fortune in finding the exact medical experts Echo needed to give her a chance at recovery. I found them in Salt Lake City, Utah.

Veterinarian Clayton Watkins teamed up with human radiation oncologist Dr. John K. Hayes to [open the first facility](#) in the world that provides HDR brachytherapy facility for pets. Brachytherapy delivers radiation by an agile, robotically controlled radioactive seed that delivers a pinpointed burst of radiation directly into the tumor. It was originally designed to target certain forms of human cancer. Human radiation oncologists have used it with tremendous success on cancers of the prostate, breast, cervix, uterus, and in the head and neck, to mention a few.

HDR brachytherapy can be very effective for nasal, paw, limb, body, urethra,

and prostrate tumors. The kinds of cancer that this form of radiation can treat include: carcinoma, fibrosarcoma, osteosarcoma, squamous cell carcinoma, squamous cell carcinoma, acanthomatous ameloblastoma, melanoma, mast cell tumor, soft tissue sarcoma, transitional cell carcinoma, prostatic carcinoma and many others. The doctors have more than three years of success stories and many very relieved dog and cat owners.

My husband and I had a long consult with Dr. Watkins and we discussed her options. Her brain tumor was not in an ideal place where an operation would be her best bet, though a teaching university hospital the next state over gave me the option of surgery plus radiation for an estimated cost of \$20,000. We all wanted to use brachytherapy not only because it is less expensive than other options, but also because it is so precise. Unfortunately, the doctors and I decided she was not a brachytherapy candidate because of where the brain tumor was located. Instead, Dr. Watkins and Dr. Hayes used external beam radiation after they consulted with their on-staff medical physicist and devised a unique plan for Echo's tumor. External beam radiation is applied from the outside in and Echo received three treatments at the human hospital with human grade equipment. The cost varies according to the type of cancer being treated.

While there are no painful side effects of radiation, we knew that she would need a few weeks to recover from brain swelling and from the tumor dying. Four weeks after her radiation, she is attending physical therapy once a week. This week we were elated when she started to trot down our long hallway and was able to resume walks!

I feel about my dogs the way one of my human idols talked about marriage. I have adored Joseph Campbell ("The Power of Myth") throughout my life. I can still hear him saying (paraphrasing here): "Marriage is saying YES to that ONE individual. It is looking across the great big sea of humans and saying:

I. Choose. You.”

I chose Echo as my pet companion and best four-legged friend 13 years ago. I made a commitment to Echo and in making that fateful decision, she made my life complete. She has been dependable, delightful, anything-but-ordinary, and life changing. I learn from her character and strength every day. I wish I were as brave, as stoic and as every bit as loving as she has always been. She offers the sweet spot in this often harsh, human-driven world of ours.

I begged the Dog Gods for one more day with my sweet sunshine of a dog. I was, for once, granted that extra day and hopefully many more to come thanks to the brilliant, big-hearted veterinarian and human oncologist who teamed up to help pets just like Echo. While we know Echo is a senior girl and her days with us are numbered, I have hope for her that has been denied me and my dogs for decades.

Post Script: Dr. Watkins stepped in to save Echo’s life a second time this week. Echo was lethargic and suddenly unable to walk again so I rushed her to her local veterinarian for blood work. I received the call with very bad results indicating that her cancer had spread while waiting to meet with an internist to see if there were additional ways we could help Echo best recover from her illness. Everyone I spoke with felt the end had come for our sweet girl (and I was very concerned about her as well) . . . everyone except Dr. Clayton Watkins. He asked to see her and he did a sonogram of her organs. As he did that he explained how and why the high dose of steroids she had to be on after the radiation could cause most of the ugly lab results. He discovered Echo did have a UTI – something fairly commonly occurring on high doses of steroids. He told us that the type of brain cancer she had does not spread to other parts of the body. The sonogram and other tests confirmed us that her cancer had NOT spread. She was put on antibiotics and

IV fluids and was soon walking again and back to her sprightly little self a few days later. Needless to say, we are huge fans of Dr. Watkins!