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Myrtle Beach vet offers pets stem cell treatments

Oct 29, 2011 12:00am

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MYRTLE BEACH, S.C. (AP) — Beau Pastor, a 14-year-old Lab-chow from Darlington, has suffered painful and debilitating arthritis in his hips for the past couple of years.

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His owners, who've had him since he was 8 weeks old, had to help him walk, and he was on a lot of medication that wasn't really working.

"There were a dozen things we tried over the last couple of years," said Bill Pastor. "If we hadn't found this, he would have been paralyzed within the next couple of months."

The Pastors' local vet recommended one more option.

"He has been a great friend and a faithful companion, and his owners wanted to do everything they could to make him more comfortable," said Dr. Noel Berger of the Animal Hospital and Laser Center of South Carolina in Pawleys Island.

That's why Beau recently became the first of his kind in this area to receive a cutting-edge stem-cell treatment that should relieve his pain and allow him a longer and happier life.

In the morning, under general anesthesia, Beau underwent doggie liposuction to remove 1 to 2 ounces of adipose tissue - or fat - from behind his shoulder blades.

While Beau rested and relaxed, Berger processed the stem cells from the fat sample, extracting 20 million to 30 million of the regenerative cells from each milliliter of liquid fat.

A few hours later, the timer went off and the processing was done.

Just after lunchtime, Berger injected the stem cells into Beau's hips and administered more through an intravenous tube, becoming the first Grand Strand veterinarian to perform this procedure.

Beau went home that afternoon.

"A lot of people look at dogs and cats as pets," Pastor said. "We tend to look at them as family. Any one of my four animals gets as good health care as I do."

Berger said Beau should not have much pain at all from the extraction site or the injections, and should begin to show signs of improvement in his hips in two to three weeks. After that, his condition should improve for about six months, when he will level off.

The stem cells will dissolve the excess bone in the ball-and-socket joints of Beau's hips, and regrow cartilage where it has been worn away.

They will also help Beau's heart, liver and brain.

It could be a year or more before Beau begins to feel arthritis in his hips again.

"Hips are like tires - the more you use them, the more worn they get," Berger said. "You can retread them, but eventually the retread will go, too."

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But the stem cells - some of which Berger banked - can be re-administered without more surgery, and that treatment can be performed countless times, until apoptosis, or "programmed cell death" sets in. At that point, Beau's natural life will be ending, and the treatment won't help anymore.

The animal hospital has been nursing a 10-year-old cat, Granny, who was the rope in a two-dog tug-of-war about three weeks ago.

She spent about a week in a coma, and since waking up, she has been regaining her strength. Her owners have been there every day, loving her and feeding her, and they want Granny to come home.

But her leg, which one of the dogs badly damaged, has torn muscles that are even missing some pieces.

Granny recently got some stem cells too, in an attempt to save her leg.

Berger said he was optimistic the process would work for the cat as well as the dog.

Stem-cell therapy has been in use all over the world for several years now.

Berger said there was an older procedure, launched in about 2003, that worked well but required two surgeries and more resources, as well as sending the tissue to the West Coast for processing.

"Now we have better technology," he said.

He's able to process the fat and stem cells in his hospital lab, using lasers to activate the stem cells. Because these are adult stem cells, not the more controversial embryonic cells - they have a more limited use. Adult cells can only be used for bone, muscle and cartilage, as well as some heart and liver tissue regeneration.

It doesn't turn the animals back into puppies or kittens, but it vastly improves the quality of life, Berger said.

Because of the newer procedure, the treatment is less expensive than it would have been - about \$1,800 for a dog or cat and about \$2,400 for a horse, compared to treatments that could range as high as \$4,000.

"We saw a wide range of prices," said Bob De Witt, a spokesman for MediVet-America.

Americans spent \$48.3 billion in 2010 on their companion animals, according to the American Pet Products Association, up from \$28.5 billion in 2001.

He said he has represented MediVet for just more than a year and has followed some of the cases as the dogs have improved. MediVet says it has a 94 percent success rate.

"A lot of vets say the procedure is easier than a spay or neuter," De Witt said. "A lot of them say they are just amazed. They hadn't been able to do anything for these dogs and cats before except put them on drugs and send them home."

Beau was videotaped Monday morning to document the difficulty he had in walking.

De Witt said when Beau comes back for a re-check in a month, there should be a noticeable difference.

"Across the board, we are seeing tremendous results," he said.

Pastor said Beau was a playful dog, always into everything. He doesn't expect him to go back to that, especially because he's an older dog.

"It's not a cure, but he should live another year or two without pain," he said. "That's the goal."

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