

March 2007 AKC Gazette

Necropsy; Yes or No?

Consenting to a necropsy, or postmortem exam, can be difficult even for the most experienced dog owners.

A necropsy is not always needed. If a dog has been diagnosed with a terminal disease that runs its course, or if an elderly dog simply fades away and is euthanized or dies peacefully of "old age" then a necropsy would probably be of little use.

However if a young and apparently healthy dog suddenly sickens and dies, there are several reasons that a necropsy should be done to try to identify the cause of death. Infectious disease or some sort of toxic substance could be involved, in which case other pets might also be at risk. Information that the vet gains from identifying the cause of an unexpected death may help her diagnose and treat other animals with similar symptoms. Finding out what happened can give the owner peace of mind so that she will not agonize over whether anything more could have been done. And, very importantly, a necropsy may identify some inheritable condition about which the breeder needs to be advised so that she may take steps to prevent its being passed on in future breedings. This is important even if the dog has been bred, as it may have descendents or other close relatives who are at risk of developing or passing on the same condition.

People commonly want to know when and by whom a necropsy should be done, what it will cost, and what it will entail.

First, it should be done as soon after death as possible. If more than a couple of hours will elapse, the dog should be placed in a sealed plastic bag and refrigerated (NOT frozen) until the necropsy can be done, to prevent deterioration of the tissues.

The first procedure done in a necropsy is an examination of the internal organs via a Y-shaped incision in the abdomen and chest. Sometimes this is sufficient to determine the immediate cause of death, as would be the case with something like a torsion or other kind of bowel obstruction. However if death was preceded by neurological symptoms it may require an examination of the brain and spinal cord as well, and these parts are more difficult to access and examine. If the gross examination of organs fails to identify the cause of death, pieces of tissue from various organs are obtained (biopsies) and sent to a pathology lab for microscopic examination. In addition, if the vet suspects a toxin or an infection, cultures and blood chemistry may be required. The cost can therefore vary, depending on who does the necropsy and which tests are needed.

Sadly, sometimes even the most thorough necropsy may fail to give the answer. This, though, is not commonly the case. Difficult as some people find this decision, many consider it an owner's responsibility to herself, her dogs, and her breed to pursue a cause of an unexpected death as diligently as possible.