A SPECIAL “HEART”

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With February being heart health month, I would like to talk about one of my most interesting, even if sad, heart cases. Many years ago, I was presented with a four-year-old, spayed female, flat coat retriever that had an appointment scheduled with the ophthalmologist for a lateral strabismus in the left eye and no other symptoms reported but came to the emergency service the day before her appointment for lethargy.

She was walking and wagging her tail, just a happy and sweet dog, and you would have never suspected that her heart rate was 290-300 with ventricular tachycardia. A CBC, blood chemistry panel, T4, and urinalysis were all within normal limits. Abdominal ultrasound and thoracic radiographs were also unremarkable. She was treated with intravenous lidocaine, which reduced her heart rate to 120-140, providing much better perfusion, but continuous ECG continued to show a multiform ventricular arrhythmia.

When the cardiologist was available, an echocardiogram revealed a concentrically thickened myocardium more suggestive of hypertrophic cardiomyopathy and a very scant amount of pericardial effusion. I successfully obtained a sample of the fluid with diagnostic pericardiocentesis, but unfortunately, this only revealed an inflammatory modified transudate. With no other choices for diagnosis, I had to do a fine needle aspirate of her myocardium.

Honestly, my heart was racing when I had to stick a needle into the poor pup’s heart; thankfully, the procedure was uneventful, and I finally diagnosed her with primary cardiac lymphoma.

Sadly, with her very guarded prognosis, the owners elected euthanasia which was an emotional time for all of us. A full necropsy was performed, and we could only find evidence of lymphoma in the ventricular muscle.

Despite the outcome, her case has been dear to my heart, requiring me to work side by side with owners and other specialists, delving deep into the diagnostic workup, and pushing me into performing a procedure I never thought I would have to do antemortem. This case is a true example of why I love being a veterinarian, challenging me on the medicine and, even though only a short few days, created a special bond with not only the dog but her owners as well.