

*Katherine Parr is a Westie owner who is dedicated to her pet and to the breed. As you can see by her article she has done a lot of research to find out what might have caused her Westie's problem. She contacted the Foundation to see if we could be of help to her. We currently are supporting research on Congenital Cataracts and DNA identification. She hopes that perhaps her article will give other Westie owners more knowledge in this area.*

## **Elusive Diagnosis and SARDS**

Winter 2004, *NEWS*

**Suddenly Acquired Retinal Degeneration Syndrome (SARDS)** causes blindness in otherwise healthy dogs. Veterinary researchers can only speculate about the cause as resources are limited; because dogs remain in otherwise good health, examination of the ocular organ is also limited.

This syndrome crosses breeds and afflicts mongrels as well, so we know that SARDS is not breed specific. Observing the similarities between SARDS and macular degeneration in humans, Caroline D. Levin, a registered ophthalmologic nurse who has studied the syndrome, suggests that inadequate nutrition from some commercial pet foods might cause intestinal damage that triggers a destructive response in the cellular network. Hers, however, is one of the few attempts to describe a possible cause of SARDS.

A year ago, my five-year-old Westie began showing signs of SARDS onset; however, neither I nor our veterinarian recognized the signs. The initial indicator appeared as significant weight gain. We tried various methods in restricting his diet, including changing to a high fiber kibble that only increased his bowel activity and failed to reduce pounds. A second indicator went unrecognized, the loss of sight. On walks, Seamus would lag behind walking slowly and tentatively with his head down. He seemed confused and lethargic, so the vet and I attributed the behavior to obesity. Over a six-week period monitoring the dog's health, including blood tests for various abnormalities, a third symptom appeared: head tremors. At first, they were barely perceptible. It seemed that his head would shake but when I watched him closely, the movement stopped or seemed to disappear. Eventually, however, I was able to document the tremors with a camcorder and when the vet viewed the tape, he leapt to a diagnosis: White Shaker Syndrome.

By that time, I had researched canine head tremors and I knew that the diagnosis was mistaken - White Shakers is not limited to just the head or to one region. I turned instead to the AKC's West Highland Terrier Group where I found knowledgeable people who gave me insightful advice to consult specialists. A neurologist identified the blindness immediately and an MRI eliminated the possibility of a brain tumor. Next, a veterinary ophthalmologist performed an ERG, or electroretinogram, to determine the retina's ability to register light. The results were conclusive- ninety per cent degeneration of the retina's capacity to respond to light. And there was nothing to be done- no cure, no therapy. After spending two thousand dollars on specialists, I learned quite simply that, other than blindness, my dog is healthy.

The following weeks were a time of adjustment for both pet and owner.

Although Seamus showed signs of adjusting to his blindness, he also showed clear signs of depression. Gone was the happy face that seemed to smile at me with delight. Gone, too, was his whimper when he needed to go out. He would just sit in front of me and stare, an emerald green glow reflecting through his dilated pupils. As time progressed, Seamus learned to walk along beside me, preferring to be unleashed when he found himself on familiar paths. His gait now approximates a normal, sighted dog's and he'll even break into a canter, although the terrier bursts of speed are gone. His senses of hearing, smell, and touch guide him through his world, and, at times, I detect the familiar Westie grin that endears the breed.

Yet I can't help but wonder whether the advancing blindness might have been arrested. I have learned that SARDS is similar to macular degeneration in humans where research indicates that certain dietary supplements can reduce vision loss. Zinc and lutein, especially, seem to be significant supplements in retarding vision loss in humans, according to the National Eye Institute. Further, I am puzzled by descriptions of SARDS, specifically that the onset is sudden and blindness complete, practically overnight. It seemed that my dog's blindness progressed over the course of weeks. Had early diagnosis been accurate, might we have prevented the advance of the retinal degeneration? Perhaps I'll never have the answer to my question, but I sincerely hope that dissemination of information about SARDS to veterinarians will prevent others going through the months of confusion, worry, frustration, and expense that I experienced.