

Rare Cancer and Cooper

By Linda Hunt and Teresa Barnes

WFA spoke with Westie owner Linda Hunt about her beloved Westie, Cooper, who faced a rare kind of cancer and what she and her husband, Craig, went through trying to help him.

WFA: Tell us about Cooper.

LINDA: Cooper was my Westie and my best friend. He was a happy, funny, active eight-year-old dog.

WFA: How did you know Cooper was sick?

LINDA: I noticed a lump on his left shoulder on October 8, 2020. It was about the size of a pea. I was concerned so I took him to our veterinarian who performed a Fine Needle Aspirate (FNA). The test was inconclusive and I was told to keep an eye on it until Thanksgiving.

WFA: So, you were prepared to watch the lump for almost two months?

LINDA: I watched it like a hawk for days and weeks and prayed it would disappear on its own. It didn't and I grew increasingly uncomfortable at the prospect of waiting until the end of November to find out more.

WFA: What did you do to speed things up?

LINDA: I contacted the veterinarian and asked for the lump to be removed and biopsied. Before the scheduled procedure, and after his bloodwork was drawn, I had Cooper groomed. With his shorter hair, I discovered a second lump on his left flank. I somehow knew we were in trouble, but I had no idea how much.

WFA: What did the bloodwork results show?

LINDA: It showed his platelet count was so low that he was in danger of bleeding out. So, we got him to the veterinary

emergency room quickly where they took Cooper from us and told us to go home and await results of an ultrasound.

WFA: That must have been tough to leave him.

LINDA: It was agony and we were frantic. Finally, on November 21st, the veterinarian called with the pre-op blood test results. His platelet count was low. An emergency room veterinarian, one we had never met in person because of COVID, diagnosed our Cooper with a rare and inoperable metastatic adrenal cancer - pheochromocytoma. We were told it had invaded his caudal vena cava and had spread to his lymph nodes, spleen and possibly his bone marrow. His prognosis was grim.

WFA: How incredibly painful for you both. [background on Cooper's cancer: The Merck Veterinary Manual defines pheochromocytoma as rare tumors that occur in multiple species, but most commonly in dogs. The tumors originate in the adrenal medulla and can be challenging to diagnose. According to a Veterinary Pathology journal article from 2015 by Edmondson et al, pheochromocytoma is the most common tumor of the adrenal medulla in dogs. This cancer is often associated with cardiovascular disease. The most common symptoms include weight loss, anorexia, depression, weakness, and occasional collapse. Shortness of breath, tachycardia and hypertension is common with the condition.]

WFA: This cancer is so rare, did you seek a second opinion?

LINDA: We took him to PennVet Hospital in Philadelphia, one of the best vet hospitals in the country. He was seen by a team of doctors from oncology, surgery and internal medicine – all brilliant and all concluded it was just too late. They explained that adrenal cancer in dogs is extremely silent and exceedingly rare. In their words, it was “very bad luck”.



Linda and Cooper

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WFA: Was Cooper in pain?

LINDA: Thankfully, they said it tends to be asymptomatic, so Cooper wasn't suffering. Most cases are found incidentally, like his was. Furthermore, they had never seen it metastasize to the skin the way it had on Cooper. The lumps were the only clue I got. My amazing boy had fought it for who knows how long (they couldn't pinpoint when it started or explain why it happened) with not a complaint or change of any kind. He was the same active, squirrel chasing, food begging, loving and perfect Cooper he'd always been.

WFA: What were your treatment options?

LINDA: They told us that in some cases, surgery was an option, but it is a very risky procedure and serious post-op complications are common. 13 days after his diagnosis, it became obvious that he was indeed very sick and he declined

rapidly. I've never seen anything like it in my life and it has left me traumatized.

WFA: It must have been incredibly difficult to say goodbye to Cooper.

LINDA: On Dec 7, at 9:00 a.m., our doorbell rang. I had called a home euthanasia service called Lap of Love and the vet arrived who would help us to somehow say goodbye. Cooper, ever the gentleman, even got up and greeted her, but then went right back into my arms, exhausted from the effort.

He left us peacefully that day, cradled in my arms, and was surrounded by his family who loved him so. It was only 16 days since we were told he was terminal. To see my husband and grown children sobbing uncontrollably was just so painful yet it was a true testament to how much Cooper was loved and how deeply he touched our family.

The WFA is dedicated to helping to improve Westie health and to uncover causes and treatments for rare cancers and other conditions. Please consider making a tax-deductible donation to help save Westies like Cooper.

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