

What Would My Berner Choose?

By Nancy Kay, DVM, Dipl. ACVIM

You may not have realized it at the time, but when you adopted your Berner, you “signed” an unwritten contract whereby you accepted “power of attorney” to make medical decisions on his behalf. Making such decisions can be challenging. For starters, there is often the need to comprehend and sort through a good amount of technical/medical information. Secondly, we all love our dogs dearly, and the thought of making the wrong choice on their behalf is a dreadful one indeed. It would be different if they could voice a clear opinion; instead the burden rests 100 percent on our imperfect human shoulders.

As you navigate the world of health care with your Berner, I encourage you to stay focused on the following two vision statements of medical decision-making:

- Choose what serves your dog’s best interest;
- Choose what best serves your peace of mind.

How Do You Determine What Is In Your Dog’s Best Interest?

When deciding whether to proceed with a diagnostic test or treatment plan, here are some important questions to consider. For purposes of illustration, I will use the example of cruciate ligament disease (a torn ligament within the knee, which is all too common in Bernese Mountain Dogs).

What Are the Facts?

I have nothing against good old-fashioned “gut” feelings, but when it comes to your dog’s health, I recommend being well-informed over going on instinct any day. Read all you can and ask your vet to explain the pros and cons of every single treatment option. There are both medical and surgical options for treating a torn cruciate ligament. Not only that, there are at least half a dozen surgical techniques to choose from, and each one has its advantages and disadvantages. If you opt for surgery, research the surgeon. Which technique does she prefer and why? How often has she performed this surgery? A wonderfully reassuring answer sounds like, “I’ve performed this procedure 10 to 20 times a year for the past five years.” Less comforting is, “I’ve done this surgery a few times.”

Does the Plan Make Sense?

My own dog, Vinnie, tore his cruciate ligament while performing his “Tigger routine” approximately six months after undergoing surgery to remove a malignant skull tumor. Did it make sense to proceed with surgery without first performing tests to make sure his cancer had not recurred? Not in my book! Surgery to repair his torn cruciate was performed only after a variety of tests indicated that he remained cancer-free. Likewise, it doesn’t make sense to perform tests that don’t “jive” with your dog’s problem, would not change how you would proceed or would not provide you with some necessary peace of mind. I encourage you to question, investigate, poke and prod until things do make sense to you.

How Does Your Berner’s Personality Play a Role?

Your dog’s personality is an exceptionally important factor to consider when acting as his advocate. Some dogs are couch potatoes, while others cannot stand a sedentary lifestyle. If the latter describes your dog, he’ll want you to choose the treatment for his bum knee that requires the shortest duration of confinement. And a Berner who loves being at the vet’s because it’s an opportunity to get cookies and attention will tolerate frequent bandage changes far better than the shy fellow who rebuffs all versions of vet-clinic bribery.

How Does Your Berner’s Age and Overall Health Play a Role?

When it comes to making decisions for your older Berner, consider his functional rather than his chronological age. Remember, the primary goal of any therapy is to restore a dog’s baseline level of good health regardless of his age. A 10-year-old Berner who has been “healthy as a horse” might be a better candidate for cruciate ligament surgery than a 6-year-old Berner who has had longstanding medical issues.

Can You Change Your Decision if You Don’t Like What You See?

Sometimes the knowledge that a change of heart will be perfectly okay turns a monumental decision into a much easier one. For example, if after a month or so your dog’s lameness hasn’t responded to medical therapy, can surgery for a torn cruciate still be performed successfully? You bet!

What Does Your Berner Think?

I encourage you to spend a little nose-to-nose and eyeball-to-eyeball time with your sweet dog. Such one-on-one time provides invaluable feedback about what your dog would have you choose on his behalf. And, nothing is more important than that. 🐾

In the April issue of The Alpenhorn, read about ways to protect your peace of mind when making difficult medical decisions for your dog.



About the Author: Dr. Nancy Kay is a board certified small animal internist at the Animal Care Center in Rohnert Park, California. She is the author of *Speaking for Spot: Be the Advocate Your Dog Needs to Live a Happy, Healthy, Longer Life* (www.speakingforspot.com).

Editor’s Note: Nancy Kay, DVM, DCVIM, is the winner of the 2009 Hills Animal Welfare and Humane Ethics Award given by the American Animal Hospital Association to a veterinarian or non-veterinarian who has advanced animal welfare through extraordinary service or by furthering humane principles, education and understanding. She was nominated because of her book, *Speaking for Spot*, her work in improving client-veterinarian communication and her founding and facilitating a pet loss support group that meets weekly at her hospital. The award will be presented at the AAHA Annual Meeting in March, 2009.