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Local News - Friday, May 16, 2003

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Many older pets need proper care, waiting for homes

Pet Pourri

By NATHAN J. WINOGRAD

It is the heart wrenching part of any Disney movie. The old dog goes out to the country to find a quiet place to die. Although we weep, we take solace in the fact that he has had a good long life. "It is, after all, his time," we tell ourselves as we muffle our tears lest we betray them to our movie mate.



Nathan J. Winograd

In real life, dogs or cats rarely go to the country to find a quiet place to die. Old dogs and cats, just like other strays, wander off and get lost. But a good percentage of them find their way to the local humane society or SPCA. If this year is anything like years past, about 70 "senior citizens" will make their way to the SPCA, grey about the muzzle, a little slow on the trot, some a little fuzzy with their eyesight. Most will be neutered, clean and appear well cared for. But their owners won't come looking, thinking it was their time and that they just wandered off to find that Disney-like quiet place.

In fact, the pet is waiting at the shelter for an owner who will never come. If Disney put that into one of their movies, we'd have something really sad to cry about. The answer for owners of older pets is simple: Keep looking and chances are they'll turn up. A 15 year-old dog is not as uncommon as they once were and cats are living upward of 20-plus years.

Indeed, advances in veterinary medicine and nutrition mean more dogs and cats are living to a ripe old age. And aside from better supervision, some simple changes in how you care for your maturing pet will make his or her older years truly golden. Once your dog or cat qualifies for senior citizen status, she or he will require extra care and attention, and have different

nutritional and exercise requirements. In addition to changes in general care, you need to be watchful for age-related illnesses. It is worth taking your pet for a physical examination and a blood-screening test, which can help identify problems early on, and increase his comfort in twilight years.

Changing the food that you give your pet is usually recommended, as some brands offer complete food for different life stages of a dog. This will help ensure that your pet continues to get the vitamins and supplements she needs and take into account a more sensitive stomach or teeth. Particularly for dogs, advancing age generally means less exercise, though more frequent, but shorter, walks are best. Be careful, however, as less exercise can lead to an overweight pet who will have more difficulty keeping stiffening joints supple, and excess weight worsens the symptoms of arthritis.

You should also consider what you can do to make your home easier to negotiate. Raise the food bowls, so that your pet does not have to bend to the floor to eat and drink. Try to minimize the number of steps your dog or cat has to climb by moving his bed and food to the same level, or installing ramps. A pet ramp will help your dog in and out of cars as well. You can use a harness to help take weight off back legs when walking, but it is important to keep your dog moving a little bit each day.

Older dogs and cats need everything a young one needs: good food, fresh water, adequate shelter, grooming, exercise, and socialization. With old age comes the need for a few extra things: different food, better supervision, a little extra health care, but most of all, more time with you.

Winograd is executive director of the Tompkins County SPCA. He can be reached via e-mail at winograd@spcaonline.com or by calling 257-1822. Pet Pourri is published monthly in The Journal. Pet-related questions from readers are welcome.

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