Considering quality of life in dogs with epilepsy

Good communication and owner involvement are fundamental to a positive outcome in epilepsy cases

Epilepsy is the most common chronic neurological disorder in dogs and humans, with many similarities present between the two species (Shihab et al., 2011; Winter et al., 2018). The diagnosis of epilepsy is reached by a combination of history, signalment and investigations that generally include blood tests, MRI of the brain and CSF analysis where appropriate.

In one study, half of the owners reported that knowing more about the cause of seizures helped them understand their dog’s problem better and the costs associated with this were worthwhile. Reaching a diagnosis increased both owners’ and veterinary surgeons’ confidence in case management (Chang et al., 2006).

The diagnosis of epilepsy implies an ongoing commitment and associated costs with the management by the owners, and therefore it is important to understand the impact of this disease on both dogs’ and owners’ quality of life. Owner involvement is paramount to a good outcome and consequently, owner education with regards to seizure identification and management, as well as good communication, are essential (Nettifee et al., 2017). It is accepted that dogs with epilepsy may have a shorter survival time, estimated between 2.07 and 2.3 years, where poor seizure control and high initial seizure frequency are associated with shorter survival times (Packer et al., 2018).

Measuring quality of life

Health-related quality of life (QoL) is defined by the World Health Organization as “an individual’s perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns. It is a broad ranging concept affected in a complex way by the person’s physical health, psychological state, personal beliefs, social relationships and their relationship to salient features of their environment.” This definition cannot be extrapolated to dogs and measurement of QoL in animals can be challenging.

Assessment in animals should include not only physical health but also all aspects of the pet’s life (Belshaw et al., 2015). This assessment is performed by the owners where they recognise and interpret their animal’s behaviour. As much as this may be subjective, the same occurs in humans where self-reporting is not possible (Belshaw et al., 2015; Wessman et al., 2016). In humans, evaluation of QoL is part of the assessment of the success of treatment and the same should happen in dogs.

Canine epilepsy studies have focused on the seizure presentation itself, seizure control and side effects of medications used as well as its impact on the owners. Chang and colleagues found that a good QoL, adequate seizure frequency (in this case considered one seizure every three months or less) and acceptable side effects of anti-epileptic drugs were the most important factors, and that administration of medication and monitoring and costs were not a concern.

One third of owners with work commitments and two thirds of owners without work commitments reported that caring for an epileptic dog did not interfere with their commitments, but 60 percent of them reported that it affected their free time regardless of seizure control (Chang et al., 2006). The owner’s quality of life correlates with the perceived quality of life of the pet and some owners reported panic attacks, depression and feeling isolated for looking after an epileptic pet (Wessmann et al., 2016).

RAQUEL TREVAIL

Raquel Trevail, DVM, DipECVN, MRCVS, graduated in 2004 from the Universidade de Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro, Vila Real, Portugal. Raquel moved to the UK where she completed an internship in the Animal Health Trust followed by a residency at Glasgow University Veterinary School. She was awarded the European Diploma in Veterinary Neurology in 2010.