

Can we Talk, Please? Linda Aronson, DVM



Imp and Friend, 2020

I am as capable of denial when it comes to my animals as the next person, so back in February when my almost 8 year old Beardie Imp was struggling, bumping into things, I thought she must be having trouble with her hair in her eyes, and indeed when I replaced one pony tail with two it helped for a day or two, but it very quickly became obvious that she was blind. As a vet student I remembered learning about a condition called SARDS – sudden acquired retinal degeneration syndrome – where a dog suddenly went blind, pretty much overnight, it was associated with Cushing’s disease – or at least Cushing’s like symptoms – polyphagia (increased appetite), polydipsia (increased drinking) and polyurea (increased urination). Imp showed no sign of Cushing’s. I also knew there was a condition called Immune-Mediated Retinal Detachment Syndrome which was even rarer, but which could be reversed with prednisone, so

I booked an appointment with a veterinary ophthalmologist, and Imp and I took a ride to NH that afternoon. SARDS was confirmed, although there was a possibility of a brain tumor, this was highly unlikely, and would manifest with other brain related symptoms, so we didn’t do either an MRI or an electroretinogram (ERG). Imp used to love car rides, but that afternoon it was clear the whole process was extremely stressful for her, and we’d have had to come back another day for either procedure, which wouldn’t have helped with her condition or changed what could be done. The vet told me that only about 60% of dogs with SARDS had Cushing’s or Cushing’s-like symptoms.

Back in the mid-90s when I was working at Tufts Veterinary School, someone told me there was a Beardie in reception. That was unusual, and I went and introduced myself to the owner – and recognized the dog’s line. She was there for SARDS and was being treated for Cushing’s. She was the only other Beardie I had heard of with SARDS. True I hadn’t heard of that many other dogs with SARDS, apparently, it is quite common in dachshunds and miniature Schnauzers but

with only 4000 estimated cases annually in North America perhaps that wasn't surprising. Still, with over 30 years monitoring Bearded Collie health, two dogs in that time suggested that Imp was very unlucky, and it wasn't a breed problem. I asked Elsa to check the open health registry, SARDS wasn't a condition we were tracking, and she came up with one more case.

However, in the next couple of days talking to beardie owners about unrelated health concerns two owners told me they also had had Beardies with SARDS when I mentioned Imp's diagnosis. That made my ears prick up, and I wondered if SARDS was something we should be tracking in the breed. So, I posed that question on a couple of beardie health groups on FB and BC-L. In just two days, I heard of 18 other Beardies with SARDS (one I bred, her owners never mentioned SARDS but that she died of kidney failure, which is a common sequela apparently in dogs with SARDS). There were also two cases of Immune-Mediated Retinal Detachment Syndrome, and one pup was born with a detached retina.

This article isn't really about SARDS though, because it made me realize once again how very important it is that as guardians of our breed and its health that we acknowledge any and all conditions that affect the breed and make efforts to minimize their occurrence. Clearly the fancy became very concerned when dogs tested as carriers of CEA and PRA, even though they apparently have yet to produce an affected offspring blind with either condition. We do have quite a large cohort of Beardies blind with SARDS. There is some suggestion that this is an autoimmune condition. The higher incidence in certain breeds suggests there may well be a genetic component. BeaCon has now added SARDS to the list of diseases we are tracking, and I would request that all those people who contacted me add their dogs to the registry, as well as others who did not. Please add it to your dog's information if s/he is already in the registry.

Over and above this though, please share your dogs' diagnoses of any condition, but especially if it is not already in the registry. Only by doing so can we learn what to be on the lookout for and try to minimize the occurrence of these conditions in our dogs. SARDS usually occurs in middle aged dogs, those that have probably already produced offspring (Imp hasn't). At BeaCon we are always happy to share our knowledge and help owners and breeders deal with diagnoses, but the system works best if we know what diseases, and complications we are dealing with.

That being said, there is no validated medical or surgical treatment available for SARDS. I joined the Dogs with SARDS group on Facebook and learned of various things that had been tried. Many seemed more likely to kill than to cure the dog, most revolved around hormonal treatment for Cushing's like symptoms, and of the Beardie owners I heard from none saw Cushingoid symptoms in their dogs. I suspect some - if not all - of the dogs who regained vision were misdiagnosed and had Immune-Mediated Retinal Detachment Syndrome. I have seen a couple of reports of dogs with SARDS who were treated with acupuncture and regained their vision. I am encouraging my daughter - human acupuncturist - to see what she can find out. I'm sure being blind is different for every dog and person.

At times we are blown away by how well Imp manages with her blindness, and watching her trot across the fields it can sometimes be hard to believe she can't see, but then there are the times she gets disoriented and goes into a blind panic, heads in the wrong direction, keeps trying to walk through walls, and at those times she fights any attempts from us to redirect her in the right direction, actively fighting if we put a leash on her or put a hand on to steer her. (Sometimes the Havanese and cats are more successful, but sometimes even they can't penetrate her panic-addled brain.) We have taught her verbal directions and when she isn't panicked those help. If we aren't with her, she panics, and destroys the house, and we fear could hurt herself, so if I am to go out, she is in her run; if I see a client she is crated.

My recent hospitalization was hard on her - my daughter took time off work to be with her; I dread trying to travel. At 8 she is a relatively young dog and in good health otherwise, but her world has shrunk down so small I question her quality of life. People always tell you animals adapt to blindness; I am guilty of telling owners that myself. I'm sure it is different for all dogs, but not all dogs do well with blindness, and so far after over 5 months I am not seeing signs of any improvement really nor reduction in her panic attacks.

Please, don't try to hide health problems you have with your beardies, share. By putting things out into the community we can all learn, and hopefully we can go beyond blaming anyone, but join together to seek solutions – or at least support each other.



Imp, August 2021 (pre SARDS). She hopped onto the pool table to participate in the conversation.