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Valley Fever (cont'd from p.8)

dogs, those that dig, and Vizslas, Greyhounds and Dalmatians are the most vulnerable.

Since around 2004 veterinarians have seen an increase in canine cases in the northern areas of LA county, specifically the Antelope Valley, West Valley and San Fernando Valley. "More awareness about Valley Fever among the general community and among healthcare providers is needed," writes Mickila Collins, DVM, of the Animal Specialty Group (www.asgvet.com) in Los Angeles. "Increased awareness could help avoid missed diagnoses."

The percentage of canine cases usually parallels that of human cases in the same geographic area, says veterinarian Lisa Shubitz, a researcher with the Valley Fever Center for Excellence (VFCE) at the University of Arizona, Tucson.

The LA County Department of Health has, since 2007, requested that veterinarians report Valley Fever cases. But since diagnosis is not always clear cut and doctors historically report just the most severe cases, many canine cases still go undiagnosed or unreported. Between 2005 and 2013, LA-area vets reported a total of 29 coccidioides cases (27 dogs and two cats); in 2014 they reported 16 canine cases.

The difficulty in diagnosis is also due to the wide variety of symptoms as well as their similarity to markers of other illnesses. The most common symptoms in dogs are coughing, lethargy and fever; but many dogs limp, suddenly have seizures or lose weight. To complicate things further, bloodwork and x-rays often don't lead to a definitive diagnosis due to false positives/negatives and ambiguous radiographs. Some veterinarians decide to prescribe antifungal drugs based on clinical signs alone.

For most dogs, treatment consists of fluconazole, an increasingly expensive medication that does not kill the fungus, but can help put the illness into remission. Laure knows pet owners who can't afford to treat their dogs.

Simple cases can be successfully treated, but disseminated coccidioides can be deadly. In a retrospective study (1990-2013) of 156 dogs conducted at University of California Davis, almost two-thirds of the dogs with disseminated cocci developed proteinuria, which ultimately leads to kidney shut-down.

No curative medication or vaccine yet exists for Valley Fever. FDA trials of the possibly curative drug Nikkomycin Z have stalled as has the financing for a human vaccine.

Still, there is hope. Professor Mark Orbach at the University of Arizona created a mutant strain of the fungus that has great potential for a canine vaccine. Dr. Shubitz eventually expects to test it in a safety and efficacy trial of 500 dogs.

All this will probably cost several million dollars, but a canine vaccine would save hundreds of dogs and the science behind it can be transferred over to the development of a human vaccine.

-Janice Arenofsky is a nationally-published magazine writer and the executive director of the all-volunteer Arizona Victims of Valley Fever (www.arizonavictimsvalleyfever.org). All contributions go toward the canine vaccine.)

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