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What if it's cancer?

We were really worried about our 2-year-old, Lucy. Our fears began when we picked her up and she whimpered. A little closer inspection revealed pain when we moved her right hip. She was eating well, didn't seem to have a fever, and was walking just fine. I ran through the differential diagnosis in my mind, as my wife voiced her worst fears: "What if it's cancer?" A quick call and our appointment was made. Lucky for us, Lucy's doctor has Sunday hours.

We really like the office where Lucy goes. We are always greeted by name, and even with the controlled chaos of a really full range of patients, everything always seems calm.

Lucy and my wife are seen promptly. The doctor gives Lucy her careful attention, gaining Lucy's confidence and proceeding with the examination slowly. And even when the doctor manipulates the painful limb, it doesn't seem to unduly bother Lucy. The doctor does the requisite x-ray and labs and takes her time explaining the differential diagnosis—which thankfully does not include cancer. We even get the medication right in the office and the doc is careful to discuss what to look for. Our young princess is given a special treat as we pay our bill and we're on our way no more than one-half hour after arriving.

"Happy New Year!" says the doc, "and do let me know how she's doing."

The medication seems to be working and Lucy is as lively as any other 2-year-old. There are the occasional tantrums, and she definitely has stranger anxiety.

Excuse me, but I hear Lucy barking now...

The funny thing is that the experience of care for our 2-year-old beagle is significantly better than our own experiences with health care providers. Instead of large networks of anonymous physicians and corporate care, it seems vets still place a priority on knowing their patients and families, and they practice in small autonomous groups.

The phone is answered expeditiously, there are convenient appointment times, and the wait to be seen is never long. We get notices when preventive care is due, there is one-stop shopping for services, and plenty of time is spent with the patient (and the patient's owner).

There are no annoying co-pays, the bills are clear, and while the patient—or should I say, owner—is fully responsible, we promptly settle up after each visit. Even the medications are reasonable. Ever compare the price of drugs for dogs and humans—even for the same medication?

Sort of makes you wonder if we should emulate our veterinarian friends.

PS: What do you think?
Write me at jfp@fammed.uc.edu

Jeff Susman, MD, Editor-in-Chief