

## **Reflections on Healing: Sandy**

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Sometimes a patient makes me reflect on my professional journey. Sandy, a Yellow Labrador Retriever who has been part of my practice almost from the beginning, is one example. I first met Sandy when she was a five-month-old puppy. It was May, 1996 and I was attending Springfest in Burgaw, the small town just north of Wilmington where I live and practice. My hospital had opened just six months prior, and I had been working 15 hours per day. I was just thinking how relaxing it was to walk around the Springfest exhibits when someone came running through the crowd to find me. A puppy had been hit by a car, and she couldn't walk or even stand.

I rushed to my hospital and the woman who had found Sandy brought her there a few moments later. The puppy could not walk, it was clear she was in a lot of pain, and she was going into shock. On palpation I discovered that her right hip had been severely dislocated. The ball at the top of her right femur was completely out of its socket. I also detected some minor fractures of her left ribs. However, I could not take radiographs without sedating her, and I needed her owner's permission.

Fortunately the woman who had found Sandy also managed to get in touch with Ronnie Riggs, Sandy's owner. He called me a short time later, and I explained that Sandy's condition was very serious. She had sustained a lot of trauma, and while she needed surgery on her right hip she would have to be stabilized first.

"I didn't even know if she would make it," Mr. Riggs says now. "I just kept thinking about that while I was driving over to the hospital." Mr. Riggs had acquired Sandy when she was eight weeks old, and had grown very attached to the feisty puppy.

Sandy was a house dog, but on the morning she was hit by the car Mr. Riggs had put her in a pen before leaving to run an errand. He was devastated when he realized later that the latch on the gate to the pen had sprung open after he closed it.

“She was a terrible puppy” he laughs today “into everything, and didn’t want to listen.” Yet her tough spirit may have been her saving grace after the car accident. I gave her medicine for shock and pain, and she recovered enough by the following day for me to sedate her and take radiographs. After that I was able to perform the joint reduction surgery to correct the dislocation.

Orthopedic surgery has always been one of my favorite areas of practice and even today, after performing thousand of procedures, I marvel at what is possible. Creating a sterile field, then fitting bones back together, or relieving the effects of arthritis, is very rewarding. My training and experience made me confident that I could correct the mechanical result of Sandy’s trauma, the dislocated hip, and her fractured ribs would heal on their own.

The day after the surgery Sandy was bright and alert. She was trying to move about even though her right rear leg was tightly bound in an ehmer sling. This type of sling keeps the rear leg in a bent position so the animal can’t extend its leg and pull on the tissue that keeps the hip joint in place. Sandy’s ligament was torn and the joint needed time to heal. Three weeks after the surgery her healing was on track and her hip joint was in place, but to assure she healed fully Sandy had to wear the sling for an entire month. Mr. Riggs shakes his head when he recalls that period. “It didn’t slow her down a bit,” he says. One night she even got into the neighbor’s trash while hopping around on three legs! There was a noticeable physical effect from sling, though; after a month of

using her front legs to pulling herself forward, the muscles in her hind end were underdeveloped.

In the long term, the trauma from the car probably contributed to the significant arthritic degeneration of both of Sandy's hip joints. A year after the accident Mr. Riggs brought Sandy in because she was limping and lethargic. Radiographs confirmed severe arthritis lesions on the tops of her hips bones, although the right side was worse. We performed a femoral head ostectomy (FHO) on her right hip, which removed the diseased ball of hip joint.

If the same case were in front of me today, I would pursue the same surgical correction of the dislocated hip. However, I now have additional treatment options that I could have used during her recovery and in subsequent years. These alternative modalities might have delayed or even obviated the need for Sandy's FHO surgery the year after she was hit by the car. In my practice today I use a blended approach of the latest technology and drugs available from Western medicine, alongside the ancient Eastern traditions of acupuncture and herbal compounds. If a similar case came into my hospital now I would recommend using a combination of acupuncture and laser therapy. These treatment options have also been proven to lessen pain and to stimulate blood flow and cell regeneration. This in turn speeds the healing process.

As new treatment options become available dog lovers must make increasingly complex and difficult decisions. New options have the potential to raise the bar of what is generally accepted as standard treatment. Still, each dog owner must decide for him or herself what the right approach is in a situation of traumatic injury. This decision-making process must take into account such variables as the dog's overall prognosis, whether the

dog can be properly cared for during rehabilitation, and what monetary resources can be dedicated to the dog's treatment. I believe that having dogs as companions is a privilege that carries the responsibility to care for our canine friends, including the responsibility to alleviate suffering.

Despite her advancing age Sandy is still active and loves to swim and play fetch. She has lost some vision to inoperable cataracts, but she still gets around well and shows the lively spirit that helped her come through a traumatic time in her puppyhood.