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## Celebrating a survivor

A day I once thought we might not make has come after all: Fred has turned 13. What a day to celebrate! About year and a half ago Fred finished treatment for cancer; adenocarcinoma of the apocrine gland of the anal



sac, to be specific. The whole kit and kaboodle, referred to in medical circles as multi-modality treatment, consisted of surgery to remove the anal sac, radiation for three weeks, and chemo. I live 10 minutes away from one of the best veterinary oncology departments in the country, the School of Veterinary Medicine at University of Wisconsin, Madison.

I didn't think I'd ever treat a dog for cancer. But it was Fred, my baby, my therapy dog who visits the Childrens Hospital. He's tolerant, we caught it early during a monthly anal gland express, and I was working a lot at that point. I didn't even think about a decision, so I can't say I made one. I treated him, despite the gloom and doom from the oncology resident.

Dogs are supposed to handle chemo better than people do. That's what everyone said. It's easier on them than it is on us. Everyone I talked to who had given their dog chemo said it wasn't that bad.

Except for some very, very rare dogs.

Like Fred.

A sensitive soul, Fred is also sensitive to chemo. His first dose of adriamycin - the "Red Death" - caused horrible bloody diarrhea and bone marrow suppression. He ended up in ICU for a couple of days. I cried endlessly, my tears streaming with his blood.

He got a few days off from radiation, and I nursed him at home. Second dose of chemo was a different drug, which he didn't get until after the 15 treatments of radiation. He did fine on mitoxantrone. At least, he did fine the first dose. The second dose also caused a terrifying bone marrow suppression episode, which required another ICU stay. I was ill with worry, berating myself for my painfully drawn out decision to continue with chemo, a decision based on multiple second opinions from veterinary oncologists around the country. Each of them said if it was their dog, they'd continue. Two bad reactions is something most veterinary oncologists only hear about but don't experience in their careers.

Several of them experienced it with Fred. That's probably it for their career. One veterinarian said it was the kind of luck people have winning a \$90 million lottery, but the luck was in reverse.

Fred did not get the fourth and last scheduled dose of chemo. I would no more have given it to him than I would have taken a sledgehammer to his head. I have no doubt another dose would have killed him. The oncologists had no doubt either.

So after surgery, he received all the radiation appropriate for his condition, and three of four chemotherapeutic doses. As a bichon/westie mix, he does not shed, so he lost most of his hair on chemo, not to mention the permanent loss from the radiation. At least the hair has grown over his hind end so he no longer looks like a baboon butt. But he did, especially when it was red like a blazing sunburn.

His treatment was horrible, painful, expensive, and successful.

Studies show a 2.5 year median survival rate after treatment. Hopefully, that means I should have him until his next birthday, his 14th. But I'm not betting on it. I've learned my luck with the lottery. A few months ago I had to interview a veterinary oncologist for an article about some other type of cancer, and he said that he wasn't sure Fred's treatment was the right approach. "He must have felt like he was shitting fire," said the academic.

So we celebrate. He has a Pet Pals shift in the afternoon, where the kids at the local children's hospital rub his belly for an hour. Because of this shift, he will, sadly, have to have a bath on his birthday, but such is life. Then after the hospital, I think he and I will take a quick trip to the "magic window" for a hamburger. Then we'll go to the dog park with some friends and I'll bring biscuits and we'll party under the warm sun and the fall colors.

I love my boy so much...he is my joy, my love, my heart dog. My survivor. Happy Birthday, Fred. May God let you share one more with me. -- *Phyllis DeGioia*, editor, [VeterinaryPartner.com](http://VeterinaryPartner.com)

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fred is lucky to have you in his life. such an amazing story.

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