



## Chelsea Animal Hospital Inc.

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### Alternatively Speaking: When What You Need Is More Time Dr. Anne Carroll, DVM, CVA

Whether for people or animals, illnesses are like accidents. They arrive unplanned and often at the most inconvenient times. Life is busy, and between family, work and just day-to-day needs, we are stretched thin more often than not. Which means that on a good day, even the simplest medical issue for our pets can be stressful to handle. More difficult is when that trip to the vet uncovers something serious and suddenly a lot of choices need to be made in a fairly short window of time. Quickly families can be left with little hope and the possibility that they could lose their companion in a very short period of time. Moments like these are difficult and there is no right choice in these situations. There are decisions to be made regarding extensive and expensive testing or whether to seek the opinion of a specialist. There is also the issue of your pet, who is not feeling that great already, having to endure more procedures and office visits. And finally there is you and your family, who want answers to justify your decisions but maybe most of all just want a little more time.

As a veterinarian that practices alternative medicine I see patients with families that are hoping for more time. They have received a dire diagnosis from their veterinarian and are just not ready to give up or give in. Perhaps western medicine may be too invasive or not offer a therapy at all. They may or may not be familiar with alternative medicine but are willing to try any route for that all elusive cure. When I meet with clients for the first time under these circumstances we discuss expectations. Of course a cure would be the goal, but realistically when a body has suffered greatly what I feel that I can offer more precisely is time. First we start with the understanding that holistic is not minimalistic. When we can, we like to do a thorough western work up to maximize our ability to use integrative medicine. But in reality we can't always have a diagnosis. Sometimes our tests fail to give us answers, or we chose not to do them due to expense or invasiveness, especially if all the evidence suggests we will have no better options to help our patient whether their condition has a name or not. In these moments sometimes there are still Western therapies to try, based on a best guess. But alternative methods rely on their own diagnostic approaches and do not require Western testing. While they too can address acute symptoms, they also are aimed to slow down the root of the disorder that allowed the illness to take hold. For this reason, alternative therapeutic options can be much more specific and effective with fewer side effects than seen when we treat with drugs alone.

Take Nika for example. She was a 6 year old Yellow Lab who had breast cancer removed six months before she developed a limp, followed a week later by a swelling on her rib. X-rays suggested she may have a return of her cancer in her rib and possibly the leg. While awaiting the biopsy result, she immediately went to a veterinary oncologist to discuss her options. But by her appointment days later, the cancer had triggered an autoimmune destruction of her own blood cells and she would bruise or bleed from the slightest bump, like a hemophiliac. The family's choices were difficult. They could leave her in the hospital to try aggressive transfusions and drugs to stop the immune disease if possible. But the odds of success were poor and she would likely not survive to come home, and even if she did stabilize she was facing a terminal cancer diagnosis with limited treatment options for that disease as well. They discussed letting her go but felt they needed more time to say goodbye, so they brought her home. Her family felt that choice was the kindest for Nika. They were also familiar with alternative medicine and asked if we could try anything if only to help her feel better until it was time to come in. We evaluated her from a Chinese perspective and started several herbs to address her bleeding disorder, as well as Western herbals,

nutritional supplements and a homeopathic remedy. Nika felt better within a day, which we were glad to hear, but what followed was quite unexpected. She continued to feel better. She stopped having any spontaneous bruising, her normal ravenous appetite was restored and her limp was much better too. Other than a medication for pain, she was not on any drugs at all. Her follow up blood work showed that the bleeding abnormalities were not totally normal but they were out of the crisis zone and stable. All together, Nika enjoyed 5 good weeks of quality time with her family before her cancer spread to other areas and her family felt it was time to say goodbye.

Olive was another patient. An 8 year old Black Lab who had the energy and appetite known for her breed and routinely would jump her families couch. Not over it, but from end to end! She was brought in for acting very uncomfortable and not eating, and her owner thought maybe her seizure condition was acting up. Unfortunately her x-rays and blood work showed a problem in her liver. Three days later an ultrasound revealed extensive cancer in her liver and the specialist offered to do biopsies with the knowledge that this disease was likely too aggressive to respond to any Western therapy. Like Nika, Olive's owners did not choose to pursue such a hopeless situation and just wanted her comfortable so they could share some last time with her. They were open to doing alternative supports but felt that she did not feel well enough to have time to try those. However, when she responded to a dose of pain medication they reconsidered. She was started on Chinese herbs, nutritional supports for the immune system and a homemade diet for supporting her liver. She felt so much better that her owner's stopped the pain medication, and within five days they could not tell that there was anything wrong with her at all. She and her family enjoyed over 5 months of quality time together before her liver went into failure and they decided it was time to let her go.

As a veterinarian I have the great pleasure of knowing some of my patients from puppy or kitten to senior. There are others, that even though our relationship may be short, our bond is just as strong and I am grateful daily to be a part of that and to offer what help I can. The sad reality is that some diseases are not curable, given the state of the patient and their body's ability to overcome a disease that has been long in the making. I think the key to providing temporary relief, especially in the face of illnesses we would consider terminal, is to address not just the acute condition we see but also the underlying disorder in the body that disrupted normal functions and allowed illness to develop. Western medicine is fast and effective for alleviating acute symptoms of illness, but it does not attempt to identify or address the problems that led to the illness's development. Alternative management focuses on that core issue and that is how it can sometimes turn around a condition that seems beyond treatment. Better yet, when that core issue is addressed as part of a wellness program before it has culminated in a life threatening condition, our hope and goal is that we avoid having to say goodbye too early all together.

Dr. Anne Carroll is owner of the Chelsea Animal Hospital where she practices both conventional medicine and surgery as well as several alternative modalities including traditional Chinese acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine. Her associate Dr. Betty Jo Black brings classical homeopathy to the practice. For more information on alternative veterinary medicine visit their website at [www.chelseanimalhospital.com](http://www.chelseanimalhospital.com)