



ASK THE TRAINER

“Ay, ay, a scratch, a scratch; marry, ‘tis enough!”

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I am not a vet, and this is one of the most frustrating aspects of working with clients to address their dogs’ behaviour issues. I see in many clients tremendous hesitation in considering the possibility that their dog’s fear or aggression is rooted in a medical cause, and there is often reluctance to take the dog to a vet to discuss that possibility. I educate myself as much as possible on health matters, but I can’t and don’t speak with the authority of a vet when it comes to diagnostics or treatment.

I see this as indicative of a broader ideology. Recall the Cartesian idea that body and mind are separate? If health is an element of our bodies, how on earth could it affect our moods, behaviours, or mental state? I recently watched a documentary on David Suzuki’s *Nature of Things* about how GI health is linked to autism. Wiping out the gut flora, usually through extensive antibiotic use at a young age, can cause recessive autism. This leaves opportunity for the overgrowth of *Clostridium*, a bacteria that produce a potent neurotoxin as its waste product. It is this neurotoxin that interferes with brain function and development, leading to autism. Something as seemingly irrelevant or simple as healthy gut flora has a profound impact on a person’s most fundamental brain function.

When I got my dog Elsie, her liver values were quite high, she had chronic diarrhea, and she had scabs, pustules, and inflammation across her body. She was also very testy with other dogs, reactive on the street and particularly indoors, guarding toys and her home; off-leash she would become overstimulated and hurdle herself onto other dogs’ heads, yelling like a banshee.

Since turning Elsie from a foster to a permanent dog two years ago, I have seen her behaviour and health swing in tandem. Last month Elsie’s skin was beautifully clear; clear like it’s never been. Not a single scab, not in any of the usual places across her chest, flanks, or lumbar region. It was amazing. I could take her through busy High Park with hardly a glance at the other dogs. She would greet briefly and continue on her way, no need for interruption or guidance from me. She wasn’t feeling that unshakable pull towards dogs who run too fast, bark too loud, or play too rough. Then, within a day, she formed scabs across her chest and belly and began once again licking her flanks hairless. When I see scabs forming on her skin, I can count on her anti-social behaviour returning. And that it did. I am staying close during greetings in the park and recalling her from dogs who, in her opinion, move too much. I am reinforcing good choices through the use of food, balls, and functional reward. At the moment she is not at the point that parks are an inappropriate place to take her; however it is a possibility and has happened in the past.

There are some behaviours that are not so directly related to her health, for instance resource guarding. I imagine, even if in perfect health, she would continue to resource guard balls and her house from other dogs. But her reaction to dogs outside of the context of resource guarding has a direct link to her health, and I can use it as a marker to assess how she may react to a new situation. I also do my best to keep her in good health, both for its

own benefit and for the behavioural improvements. She eats unprocessed foods, and I use medications sparingly or not at all (antibiotics, pesticidal parasite prevention, etc). I will use alternative options for treatment before turning to something that may have unintended consequences. Her diet is limited to exclude foods that make her sick (which is not as easy to figure out as one might think!). I have learned a lot from her about how the simplest action of what food to buy will affect not only short- and long- term health, but also how a dog feels and behaves.

So why do so many of my clients resist the idea that their dogs’ undesirable behaviour might be health related? Perhaps it’s just that one more thing on their plate that they can’t deal with. The straw that breaks the camel’s back. Perhaps it’s a financial issue – they are paying for a training session, they don’t want to be told to pay for a vet appointment and blood tests. Perhaps it’s simply a matter of not believing or caring to understand how health affects behaviour. Sometimes it’s just not understanding that what they are feeding is doing more harm than good. If it’s expensive, it must be good, right? A simple change in diet to a less processed, higher quality option can make a profound difference. (For great information on how to assess dog foods, visit www.thedogfoodproject.com or, for a nutritional consult, visit www.betterdogcare.com)

All the training in the world cannot fix a health problem, but sometimes taking steps towards physical wellness can fix behavioural problems.

