Necropsies: Post-Mortem Exams That Help the Living

When one of our puppies dies, the grief over that loss can be devastating to a breeder or owner. These are our cherished companions, so quite naturally our emotional state can overwhelm us as they leave us, particularly if that occurs at an early age. However, these dogs are also members of a breed we cherish, and so we have obligations to fulfill to that breed. One of these is to carefully record the cause of death in our dogs, especially when this occurs unexpectedly or at an early age. Therefore, particularly whenever we have a neonatal or pediatric death, we should consider having a necropsy done as a standard procedure.

Necropsy, an autopsy on an animal, is an examination of the body after death. Its purpose is to determine the cause of death, whenever possible. A necropsy is roughly divided into two portions, the gross post-mortem examination, where the body is visually and manually examined, and the histopathology portion, where organs and sections of tissue are further examined in detail (microscopically) by a veterinary pathologist. To help such an examination achieve its purpose, a complete medical history of the animal is vital along with any diagnostic testing that was performed prior to death.

The cost of a necropsy will vary based on where it is performed with a selected list of experienced pathologists for neonatal and pediatric necropsies provided below. The cost can generally be estimated up front and discussed with your primary care veterinarian.

Not all necropsies will return a definite cause of death. However valuable information will be obtained, particularly in ruling out some potential causes of death. Both the negative data (what wasn’t the cause) and the positive data (what is most likely responsible) are useful to the breeder/owner and are relevant to the dog’s family.

Necropsies, in conjunction with the animal’s medical history and pedigree information, can always offer more complete data. Evaluation of all the data involved may take some weeks to come back; however, often preliminary results can be obtained earlier, especially in cases where other animals are at risk. This should be discussed with your primary care veterinarian and the veterinary pathologist.

Necropsies can provide breeders with important data about their dogs and help them to make more informed breeding decisions. Granted some unpleasant answers may be found whenever any sort of formal testing on a dog is done, and a necropsy is always an unpleasant task to contemplate. But in our greater responsibility to our dogs and to the breed, we cannot allow our emotions and our fears to guide our actions. We cannot allow ourselves to turn away from this fact-finding mission. When it comes to our dogs, what happens to them in life and at their deaths affect not only us, but other owners and members of the dogs’ families directly, and is relevant to the breed in general. We have a greater responsibility than to our own private grief when we choose to own and breed dogs. Necropsies are not something most of us want to think about, and they can bring up questions we’d all rather not face. But it’s not acting in our best interests to not seek the answers that the breed needs; it’s simply part of our acting as responsible breeders to assemble cause of death data on our dogs. It is important to share the data uncovered with other breeders and owners in order to better understand diseases that affect Portuguese water dogs. Information can be openly reported to the Health and Litter Database and/or shared directly with the PWDCA Neonatal and Pediatric Committee.

Preparation for Necropsy
The best thing to do if you find you have lost a puppy is place the puppy in a sealable container (like a zip-lock bag, plastic trash bag, or disposable plastic container) and place it in the
refrigerator. Do NOT put the puppy in the freezer! Freezing the puppy results in the animal's cells rupturing when thawed which makes it much more difficult to determine the cause of death. Then, contact your primary care veterinarian to help arrange for a necropsy as soon as possible (within 24-48 hours of death).

History
Providing a complete history of the puppy is extremely important because it will provide your veterinarian and the veterinary pathologist with important background information which increases the chances of finding the cause of death. Any and all information is valuable. Include information related to death including but not limited to:

- when the animal died
- was the body refrigerated or frozen (DO NOT FREEZE!)
- behavioral observations (how the puppy was acting just before death)
- clinical observations (was the puppy lethargic, regurgitating, had diarrhea, etc.)
- any other puppies at risk in the litter

Further information:
Cornell University Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory
Post Mortem Service
http://www.vet.cornell.edu/biosci/pathology/services.cfm

Necropsies on Saturday and Sunday are performed on an emergency only basis with prior approval of the Pathologist-in-Charge. A fully completed Necropsy Request Form must be shipped together with the body of the animal. Courier shipment to the Animal Health Diagnostic Center can be made with any courier company that offers overnight delivery. Please note that deliveries are only accepted Monday - Friday (8 AM - 5 PM) & Saturday (8 AM-noon). When possible all remains should be refrigerated prior to shipping and should be shipped in appropriate leak proof containers. Animals should be shipped with appropriate ice packs in order to keep the remains cool. Animals presented for post mortem must be accompanied by a complete history sheet along with the contact information for the referring veterinarian. Results of post mortem examination will only be provided to the referring veterinarian. Owners must contact their referring veterinarian for test results and must provide referring veterinarian contact information prior to submitting specimens or animals for evaluation.

Link to necropsy submission form:
http://ahdc.vet.cornell.edu/docs/Necropsy_Cremation_Submission_Form.pdf

Samples shipped through a courier service should be addressed to:
Animal Health Diagnostic Center
College of Veterinary Medicine
Cornell University
240 Farrier Rd
Ithaca, NY 14853

Link to Cornell small animal necropsy information:
http://ahdc.vet.cornell.edu/test/list.aspx?Species=&Test_Name=&TstTyp=&WebDisc=PATH