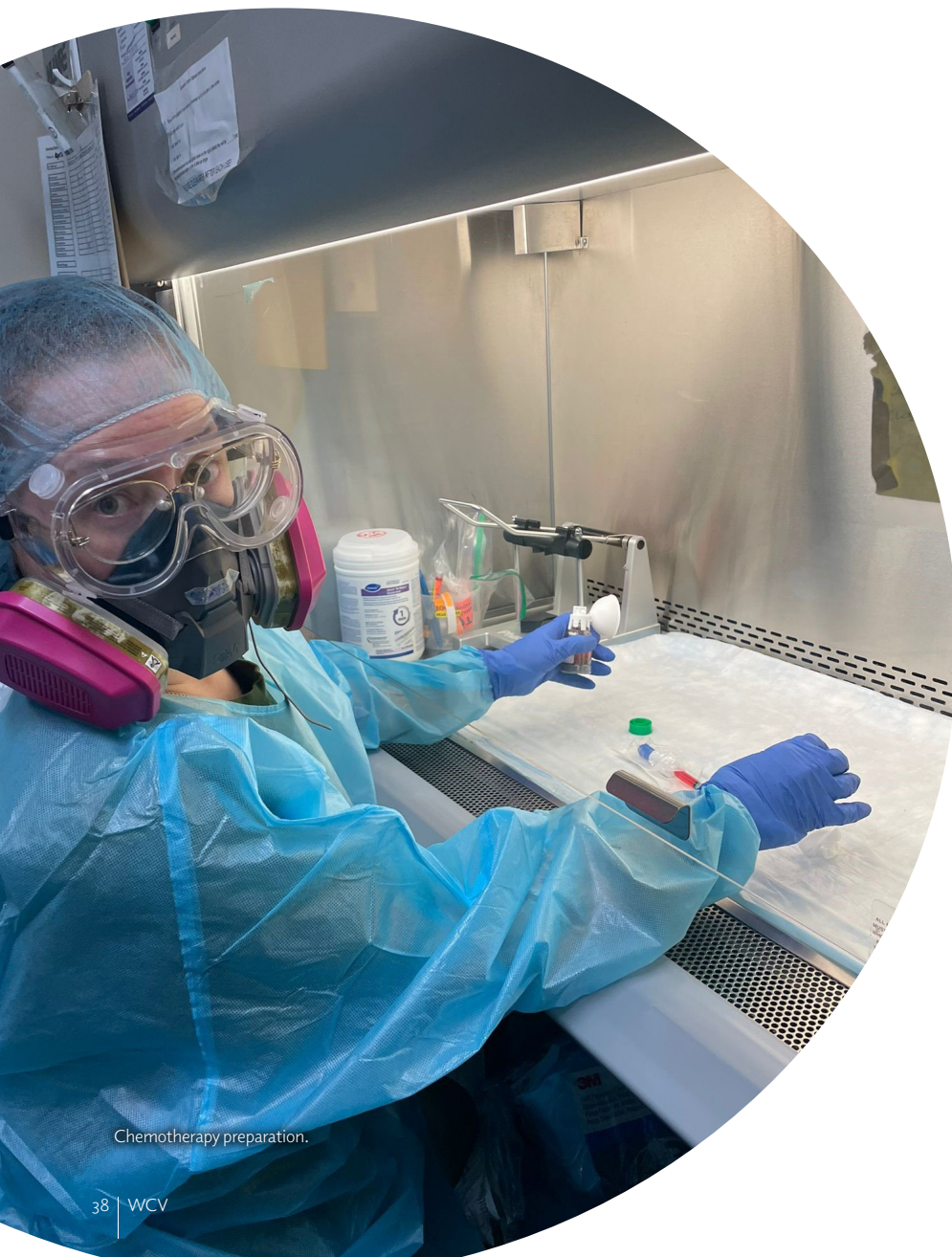


THE ROLE OF THE REGISTERED VETERINARY TECHNOLOGIST IN ONCOLOGY CARE

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Chemotherapy preparation.

“I’m sorry but your pet has been diagnosed with cancer.” Delivering the devastating news that a beloved pet has been diagnosed with a potentially life-limiting disease is an inevitability in veterinary medicine, with an estimated one in four dogs and one in five cats being diagnosed with cancer in their lifetimes. Cancer risk increases with age, meaning those working with senior pet populations are even more likely to be faced with this discussion.

When I tell people I work in veterinary oncology, the response invariably falls somewhere along the lines of how sad my job must be. However, after nine years of working in a medical oncology service, I have found my work to be largely rewarding and filled with moments of happiness and fulfillment. I have found my niche as an RVT in a field that allows for high satisfaction in terms of technician utilization, both in my technical and interpersonal skills and use of my knowledge. I have worked with many wonderful patients and their families to help them navigate cancer diagnosis and treatment.

As a newly graduated RVT back in 2014, I was given the opportunity to participate in an RVT internship program at Canada West Veterinary Specialists (CWVS), spending time with a number of the specialty departments. I was immediately drawn to oncology based on both the fascinating medicine and the opportunity to form long-term relationships with patients and their families. When a position opened up with the oncology department a year later, I jumped at the chance to be a part of their team. Through years of clinical experience, many hours of CE, completion of an extensive application package, and a certifying exam, I obtained my Veterinary Technician Specialty (VTS) in oncology through the Academy of Internal Medicine Veterinary Technicians in 2023.

Something that surprised me when I first started working with oncology patients was the highly individual response to therapy. Regardless of whether we have extensive published studies or a novel treatment with uncertain efficacy, the greatest predictor of outcome will always be an individual patient’s response. This unpredictability can lead to both disappointment when patients don’t do as well as you would hope and excitement when a patient exceeds expectations. While certainly not as fast-paced as emergency medicine, no two days are the same in the oncology department. The variety of cases and skills

required to work in this field keeps me interested and passionate for my work, even nine years later.

Another thing that surprised me was the prioritization of quality of life for veterinary oncology patients, and how well most of our patients feel throughout their treatment. The diagnosis of cancer in a pet can unearth a myriad of emotions for a patient’s family. Many have personal experience with a cancer diagnosis for a loved one, themselves, or a previous pet. These experiences can lead to preconceived notions about the impact of treatment and decisions to pursue care. This is a key area where oncology specialists can make a difference in providing education on the differences between human and veterinary oncology treatments and goals and can help pet owners make supported and informed choices.

As an oncology RVT, I provide key support to my oncologist during the diagnostic process, utilizing a large number of my technical skills in my day-to-day role. Blood collection and sample preparation, initial physical examinations, measurement and sampling of masses and lymph nodes, initial cytology review, sedation for procedures, positioning for radiographs and other imaging tests, nutrition calculations, preparation and administration of chemotherapy, and dispensing of homecare medications are just some of the tasks I perform on a weekly basis.

In addition, an oncology RVT plays a huge role in managing client communications, fielding questions related to side effects, treatment options, and monitoring protocols. Building connection and trust with pet owners is a hugely rewarding aspect of the role. This relationship of trust and mutual respect is highlighted most in helping pet owners navigate the challenges of changes to their pet’s quality of life as their disease progresses and supporting them through the difficult journey of end-of-life care. When we reach the end of a patient’s journey, the oncology team strives to ensure a peaceful transition that meets the needs of the family, whether that be in hospital or arranged in their home.

At CWVS, our oncology team works cohesively to provide optimal patient care. This team dynamic extends beyond our own service to involve other specialists as well. Treatment modalities for oncology patients may be multifactorial and involve initial stabilization, surgical intervention, radiation therapy, chemotherapy, immunotherapy, and other targeted therapies. When treatments are not available locally or within the hospital, the oncology RVT assists in coordinating referrals to external specialists. With a patient population that skews towards senior animals, each patient must be assessed holistically and comanaged with their referring veterinarian in addition to other specialists such as internists and cardiologists. The oncology RVT plays a role in this coordinated effort and must take all of the patient’s comorbidities into consideration when preparing treatments and developing sedation protocols.

Perhaps the most satisfying aspect of working as an RVT in oncology is working with the team to get to know each patient as an individual so we can strive to provide a low-stress and positive environment for each and every pet. Some patients are highly food motivated while others respond better to environmental modifications, pre-visit anxiolytics, or a combination of all three. Seeing a patient that was previously nervous in hospital walk happily through the front doors or step confidently out of their carrier is extremely rewarding.

It is impossible to choose one case that accurately captures the full spectrum of the RVT role, the unique bonds that can develop between the team, our patients, and their families, and the many ways in which the oncology team provides support to the families of our patients. We learn something from every patient we see, whether that be new approaches to disease management, tricks to improve the patient experience in hospital, or how to comanage the needs of individual patients with their families and other care providers. We learn from patients like Carson, who always enjoyed a post chemotherapy ice cream cone and had a “bucket list” created by his family. We learn from patients like Bert, who has been treated for three different cancers over the past three years, comanaged for his various comorbidities with every department in the hospital, and recently celebrated his thirteenth birthday during an appointment with our rehabilitation team. We learn from patients like Paris, who prefers a hands-off approach and generous helpings of peanut butter. We learn from patients like Abi, whose family advocated for a novel therapy in the face of metastatic disease, and that therapy is now offered to other patients.



Laboratory samples ready for submission.



Using calipers to measure and document a new mass.



Celebrating a patient’s birthday and first chemotherapy treatment.

“SEEING A
PATIENT THAT
WAS PREVIOUSLY
NERVOUS IN
HOSPITAL
WALK HAPPILY
THROUGH
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DOORS OR STEP
CONFIDENTLY
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CARRIER IS
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In addition to patient care, the oncology RVT requires extensive knowledge and focus on chemotherapy safety. Chemotherapy drugs are considered hazardous and can be teratogenic, mutagenic, and carcinogenic. Chronic exposure to chemotherapy drugs, either through direct exposure to drugs or contaminated patient waste, can lead to health conditions in workers with potential long reaching effects, such as the development of cancer later in life. Chemotherapy can also present a reproductive risk, requiring protective reassignment for workers trying to conceive. This health risk extends beyond the veterinary team to the families of patients treated with chemotherapeutics. At CWVS, another oncology team member and I serve on the Joint Occupational Health and Safety Committee to enact strict safety measures and improve standard operating procedures and monitoring protocols to protect workers. In addition, the oncology RVT plays a crucial role in client education to inform pet owners of safe handling procedures for pet waste in the home environment and timelines for enacting safety measures. One of my goals in obtaining my oncology VTS is to develop educational content on chemotherapy safety to inform veterinary professionals outside of my own practice who may be working with hazardous drugs, and to ensure that they are passing along the appropriate safety information to the families of their patients who receive chemotherapy.

Working with oncology patients requires building a strong bond with both the patient and their caregiver, resulting in meaningful relationships that help support both pet and owner during an emotionally heavy diagnosis and treatment. My hope is to continue to provide exceptional care to pets and families in need, alongside my wonderful team, for many years to come. [WCV](#)



Fine needle aspirate technique.



Graduation! Celebrating completion of a chemotherapy protocol.