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Introduction

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My heart tightens as I watch her “spaghetti legs” quiver as she drinks happily at her bowl and washes down her dinner. The menu tonight was...”whatever she wants.” It’s only a matter of time when the chapter of my story with Serissa ends abruptly and the companion that acted as my shadow for 14.5 years will leave my world. The thought brings tears to my eyes and that pesky lump to my throat.

“Hey baby girl, you want to go outside?” I say in the sweetest voice I can muster up and she looks at me with adoration, wags her pathetically haired tail and gives me a weak and croaky “BARK” as if to say “Heck yeah!” Serissa navigates the bathmats that I laid down for her and struts to the door like a runway model. At one time she was a majestic beauty of a Samoyed and even worked as a therapy dog in nursing homes (Figure 1.1) – now she was a thin, patchy haired, skinny, old girl with hot garbage breath. She was a frail geriatric herself.

But, before we could get to the door, she pops a squat and urinates on the bathmat. In past years, this would be a naughty thing, but today, I could care less! Her legs quiver harder and she almost tumbles over. She finds her balance, quickly finishes, and Serissa’s thoughts go back to being outside with mom. Nothing brings more joy to my face than seeing her sweet face turn to look at me as if to say, “You coming?” (Figure 1.2).

I was taught many things in veterinary school, but dealing with an aging and terminally ill pet was left out of the classroom lectures. In fact, most of the textbooks we read and lectures we sat through did not cover the process of aging and death. Instead, we were taught the mantra that “Old age is not a disease!” But, aging does change quality of life for the pet and the owner. We did discuss senior wellness and preventative medicine but really digging into why the body ages and what happens as things fall apart was not covered in detail. At the time, even the education of euthanasia was left to a two-hour discussion. Luckily, now at my alma mater the University of Florida (Go Gators) a comprehensive ‘end of life’ course is offered.

The lifespan of companion animals continues to get longer and longer. Just a few decades ago, a pet over the age of 10 years was an anomaly – it was not “normal”. But as we advance in technology, as the pet–parent bond grows stronger and more intimate and our societal views on companion animals shift, we are seeing a much larger population of pets reaching a much higher age and many sail into their “twilight” years with a lot of
vigor. But, what we are fighting against is still “not normal” – our bodies will eventually fail, no matter how many patch jobs we put in place.

I remember clearly as a new veterinarian when a colleague looked at radiographs of a 15-year-old cat and said “Ehh – it’s just old cat lungs.” He flipped off the light and boldly walked into the room to deliver the “good news”. I sat there thinking, “but that isn’t good ... it must possess some problem for the cat and what does it mean for him to have areas of fibrosis in his lungs?” But my deep thoughts were cut off quickly when my next patient came in, Abagail, a 13-year-old FBD (“Florida Brown Dog” or, as others would
just call her, a “mixed breed”). She had a three-month history of staring into space, acting as if she is lost, and is often found in odd places. I internally sigh because I know how frustrating cognitive disorders can be and how limited our options currently are at this time. But, I still cannot wait to see Abagail and her parents.

As much as I love a bunch of kittens and the rubbing of a puppy belly, there is absolutely nothing better than a gray muzzle. I adore hearing the stories of how they came to be in the family, the memories the pet was present for, and how great their loss will be when it comes time to say goodbye. I left general practice in 2010 and since then have exclusively helped families with home-based veterinary hospice, geriatric consultations and end of life care. I have sat on many couches, on hundreds of master beds, have wormed my way behind toilets and scaled many a cat tree in my practice – and I love it. The conditions I see may range from mobility to organ failure or simply “old age” (yes, I said it), but one thing always remains the same, the enormous love the family has for their aging pets. It is an honor to help those families through the aging process, the disease progression and finally, the moment they say goodbye.

This book was inspired by my desire to learn on a practical level why pets age, how each body system is effected by the aging process and how owners and the veterinary staff can manage the changes that occur. There is a plethora of fantastic textbooks about each of the body systems and the disease they encounter, but this book is meant to be a reference manual specific to the aging process, the care of the geriatric pet and a guide to help you with the most precious time owners have with their pets.

Fourteen and a half years seemed to have flown by as I laid next to Serissa and snuggled with her one last time while she drifted off to a peaceful sleep. Her presence in my heart will always remain. I will miss that smile, her smell, the scratching on the wall as she ran in her sleep, and even that whining in the middle of the night as her mind became more confused with cognitive impairments. How blessed I was to have such a wonderful companion who was with me through veterinary school and would bring joy to me in a millisecond. Caring for her as she aged was extremely difficult for me financially, physically and emotionally, but I would do it for 20 more years if possible. Although terribly missed, thoughts of her now only bring a smile to my face (Figure 1.3).
Serissa’s story lives on throughout my work, where her conditions and experiences helped me to further research and dig deeper into the body system. I am sure she is smiling, too, with her geriatric cohorts, as they realize that their experiences will offer insight to the veterinary community and ease the distress of pet owners when dealing with their pet’s twilight years.