

**Knight A. Emergency weight loss. In H. Woodvine (Ed.). *Veterinary Reflections*. Helen Woodvine, UK. 2009. [www.trueshortstories.co.uk](http://www.trueshortstories.co.uk).**

*“Honestly, she gained all that weight just in the last fortnight!”* Mrs Smith (name changed) told me earnestly. I stifled a sigh, which quickly became a grimace as her 60kg dog lowered itself onto my arm once again. Despite numerous, valiant attempts to digitally stimulate her contractions, and two very strong hormonal injections, Sasha showed no signs of voluntarily delivering the puppy I could feel with my fingertips, lodged high up her birth canal. Although its smooth, wet head had passed tantalisingly down my fingers several times, I had been unable to achieve the necessary purchase in the confined and slippery environment, before it retracted frustratingly out of reach.

Meanwhile, Sasha (name changed) continued to pant, depositing copious volumes of slobber onto my increasingly slippery consult room floor, impeding her foothold and mine. The increasing exhaustion of this gigantic Rottweiler resulted in ever weightier attempts to lower her bulk onto my arm, which were resisted ever more feebly by the increasingly exhausted Mrs Smith and her elderly neighbour, unsuspectingly roused from his bed some hours ago to assist.

It occurred to me that just possibly Mrs Smith might not have been feeding Sasha the healthiest of diets, exercising her regularly, nor have noticed her obesity problem when it had clearly first become evident, at least a year ago. The result was that Sasha’s muscles were weak and flabby, and she was quite clearly incapable of giving birth on her own.

This posed a problem, because the efficiency of her circulatory and respiratory systems — which would already be hazardously depressed under anaesthesia — would be further compromised by her excessive fat and poor fitness. This would increase the chances of death for her and her puppies, should we have to conduct the Caesarean section operation, that seemed more and more inevitable as the midnight hours passed.

I was somehow unsurprised to learn that Mrs Smith had neither the £1,000+ routinely necessary to pay for such an operation, nor pet insurance to cover the costs of such unexpected medical or surgical requirements. She was, in short, woefully ill-equipped to care for Sasha’s needs responsibly. However, we were not prepared to let Sasha or her unborn puppies die, which would have been the inevitable natural outcome without surgical intervention. And so, after I had reluctantly placed a call to the head veterinarian at home around midnight, Mrs Smith signed ownership of Sasha over to the practice. We would provide the necessary care, absorbing the costs ourselves, and look after Sasha and her puppies until suitable homes could be found for them.

My exhausted nurse and I quickly prepared Sasha for surgery. We amazed ourselves by somehow managing to manhandle her unconscious bulk onto the operating table, which creaked with protest under the strain. Hastened by my significant concern about Sasha’s survival chances, the incision was probably my fastest ever, despite her size, and rapidly exposed the largest uterus I had seen. Massively-engorged blood vessels pulsed alarmingly along the length of this gargantuan purple nightmare, which was distended with foetuses and fluid. As I attempted to manoeuvre it into position, the uterus suddenly tore under its own weight, ejecting copious quantities of greenish-black fluid onto the floor, from which it splashed unerringly onto the base of the white designer jeans I had recklessly chosen to wear beneath my surgical gown. *“Thank God I wore my boots!”* I thought, as I cautiously cast a glance at my long-suffering nurse, intently monitoring the anaesthetic. She would be here until 6 am scrubbing the walls.

At least the foetuses were easier to remove. Eight voluminous placental splashes later, accompanied by much frantic rubbing by the nurse (to simulate the mother’s licking), and the addition of a few drops of respiratory stimulant under little puppy tongues, five tiny, wet and apparently very hungry Rottweiler puppies squeaked vigorously at the world. Three had not survived, victims of the prolonged, unsuccessful labour prior to the op.

Thankfully, Sasha had also survived, and, with the elimination of her uterus — as well as copious quantities of fat enthusiastically removed during my incision — had lost an impressive 5 kg! I considered it the start of her emergency weight loss program. She had made a good beginning.

Unfortunately, however, it was not to be enough, because Sasha accidentally suffocated a puppy a night, for the next two nights, under her excessive weight. Although common in modern sows, which are intentionally bred for their bulk, I had never encountered this problem before in a dog! After a certain amount of head-scratching, we soon arrived at a logical solution. If Sasha was built like a sow, we would treat her like one! Accordingly, we used wooden planks to build crawl spaces around her, under which her three surviving puppies were able to escape crushing and suffocation when she rolled. It must have worked, because all remaining puppies survived. Her nursing and veterinary staff also narrowly survived, albeit in a rather dishevelled state, thanks to copious quantities of coffee and dark chocolate, mixed with a pitifully small amount of sleep.

It was, therefore, with a certain amount of satisfaction that I noted Mrs Smith's profoundly shaken tone, when I placed a courtesy call to inform her that Sasha had survived her operation. The traumatic, late-night ordeal had clearly instilled in her a much sounder understanding of the magnitude of the commitment involved in caring for — let alone breeding — a dog. Considerable time, effort and financial resources, not to mention suitable housing, are required to responsibly care for an animal companion. In both effort and reward, the commitment is somewhat similar to raising a child, and should remain for the animal's lifetime.

In this case Mrs Smith had lost her beloved companion, and by overfeeding and under-exercising Sasha — probably through misguided kindness — had needlessly endangered her life, as well as the lives of her puppies, the majority of which had not survived. Thankfully, she had no intention of acquiring another dog any time soon.

Saving individual animal lives is perhaps the most rewarding part of a veterinarian's job. Cases like Sasha's demonstrate, however, that perhaps the most important part is the education of animal guardians about the basics of responsible pet care, namely: diet and exercise, vaccinations and annual checkups, external and internal parasite control, dental care, neutering, socialisation and behavioural training, adequate space and environmental enrichment, the provision of company for social species, the specialised needs of exotic species, and the wisdom of pet insurance.

We can save the most lives using the least resources, by educating guardians about such preventative healthcare measures, which demonstrates the importance of a fact well-known to veterinary educators, but little-known outside the profession: communication and interpersonal skills are even more vital to practicing veterinarians, than surgical or other technical skills. The former are frequently challenged to the utmost, within routine veterinary practice.