

## Our faithful dog Fergus

Our faithful dog Fergus is 15 years old, which, in dog years, works out to be about 105. He spends most of his time sleeping, and is occasionally incontinent. Our dog has poor eyesight and hearing, really bad breath, frequent coughing spells due to a bad heart and seems to feel we ought to carry him up the stairs. Fergus looks really, really scruffy due to his thinning and graying pelt. He seldom moves off the couch these days except to eat or perform his natural functions. He is not particularly affectionate and never says 'please' or 'thank you' even though we are spending an increasing amount of our time caring for him. He now seems confused when he leaves or enters a room. We think that this is either because he is becoming disoriented to the house layout or has forgotten why he entered the room in the first place. We spend nearly \$100 each month on his heart medication, and a matching fortune on chicken hearts – you see the only way to get Fergus to swallow his twice daily pills is to hide them inside baked chicken hearts. When I begin to discuss Fergus's health status with my wife, she points out that the above description might also fit me except maybe for the incontinence and drug costs (I have Blue Cross you see).

The basic problem is that Fergus doesn't have a living will, advanced directive or enduring power of attorney. We never discussed this matter with him when he was younger and simply have no idea as to what his

wishes might be as he becomes increasingly old and frail. Goodness knows what we will do if he ever enters into a persistent vegetative state or requires a heroic veterinary intervention. One thing we are sure of is that he has no personal financial resources, and has maximized the amount of money we are willing to spend on him.

I know that our children are laughing at us and can't believe that we haven't yet 'walked the green mile' with our dog. They believe that the money that we are spending on drugs and vet bills could be better used elsewhere – such as for long term care insurance for their parents or a university tuition fund for their children. This is easy for them to say as their pet dogs are only middle aged.

On the other hand, in the course of our increasingly frequent visits, our dog's veterinarian always talks about our wonderful pet and how well he is doing in spite of his heart condition. The truth is that failing to carry on caring for Fergus would be a big disappointment to our ever cheerful and optimistic vet who probably has a whole lot of payments left on her late model Maserati. She has offered us tours of her doggie ICU and I have heard her talking to other customers about hip replacement operations and CT scans.

At what point will we tell our dog's vet that we are not prepared to spend any more money on our old and decaying pooch? Will we have the courage to do this in

person or will we leave Fergus outside the vet's office door in a basket with an anonymous note?

The scary thing is that some dogs can live for a very long time. An Australian cattle dog in Queensland, Australia is reported to have reached the age of 32 human years or 224 canine years on a diet of boiled kitchen scraps topped up with a weekly can of dog food. No apparent mention of baked chicken hearts or bypass surgery.

Aging pet dogs are a problem of modern times. When Audrey and I were children, our pet dogs ran free and had short but happy lives usually ended by a passing car. We have no store of inherited family wisdom as to how to cope with a geriatric pet.

All that I can think of is that old saying – 'Let sleeping dogs lie...' which, at the moment, is a pretty good description of old Fergus.