

Employment - Older workers change the face of retirement

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In this 2015 file photo, a 69-year-old retired truck driver stands in front of a truck

By Gemma Tetlow

Perceptions of age are changing and this is perhaps nowhere more obvious than in the workplace. The number of people working into their sixties and beyond has grown rapidly over the past two decades - partly driven by financial necessity, but also by opportunities for fulfilling, flexible work.

Helen McEntire is one of this growing army of older workers. At 61, she works 25-30 hours a week as a carer. Ms McEntire says working for her employer is “fantastic” and the job has given her a “renewed sense of self”.

Her employer, Home Instead Senior Care, believes companionship is an important part of caring, which plays to her strengths as an older worker. Being closer in age to her clients, she is able to relate to their experiences. Though some elements

Large numbers of older people now work for themselves, often part time

of the job could be physically challenging, new technologies, aids and adaptations reduce those demands.

The notion of retirement as a significant period of leisure at the end of life is a recent phenomenon. But growing financial pressures - caused by rising longevity and the ageing of the baby boom cohort - have pushed governments across the developed world to implement reforms.

Some of these - such as anti-age discrimination legislation and flexible working provisions - remove barriers. Others - like increasing the state pension age - push older people to keep working.

“In the coming years, the number of jobs created will outstrip the

number of young people entering the workforce,” says Anna Dixon, chief executive of the Centre for Ageing Better, a charitable foundation. “There is a growing recognition among employers that older people make up an important part of the labour market”.

“In general, good work is proven to be good for you,” notes Christopher Brooks, of Age UK, the largest UK charity working with older people.

There are nearly 10 million UK workers aged 50 and over - almost a third of the workforce. More than a million of them are aged 65 and over.

Many older workers look for the opportunity to work shorter, more

flexible hours. Working men in their late 60s work on average 10 fewer hours each week than those in their late 50s. For Keith Alldritt, also a care giver for Home Instead, the ability to work part time and fit it around visiting his grandchild is a major attraction.

The same is true for Professor John Rees. Until the age of 62, he worked 70 hours a week as an NHS consultant and an academic at King’s College Medical School.

“I could have carried on but I was finding it more tiring than I had five years earlier,” he says. He now volunteers for about 100 days a year on projects related to global health, mainly in Somaliland and Sierra Leone.

Around eight in ten men, and six in ten women, aged over 50 have at least some private pension entitlement. The ability to top up earnings with pension income means some older workers are keen to take part-

time jobs that might be unattractive to younger workers looking for higher earnings.

A desire for more flexibility also partly explains the prevalence of self-employment among older workers. Large numbers of older people now work for themselves, often part time. This self-employment is increasingly made up of higher skilled occupations, in the finance and business services sectors, in London and the Southeast.

Older workers provide benefits to their employers and colleagues by bringing skills and life experience that younger people may lack. Some, like Prof Rees, apply them in ways closely related to their previous work: he helps overseas medical schools develop their training programmes.

Others apply their talents in less obvious ways. Mr Alldritt used to be a police sergeant but now uses his investigative skills to piece together life journals for clients who suffer with dementia, “helping them to re-connect with the present by remembering the past.”

But learning new skills is also an increasingly important part of the trend towards working longer, allowing people to retrain for new careers. Having been made redundant and suffering with depression, Jeff Ruffell has found “a new lease of life” at age 57 by joining Barclays’ Bolder Apprenticeship programme. It allows him to “learn something new every day.”

Patterns of working among older people have changed rapidly over the past 25 years and the picture will continue to evolve. The Department for Work and Pensions estimates 12 million under-50s have inadequate pension savings. Working for longer will be an important means of topping these up. But further changes will be required to ensure longer working lives work for everyone.

“There are many people who find it difficult to keep working because of health conditions or caring responsibilities”, says Mr Brooks. “People working in lower skilled roles are less likely to work flexibly than those working in higher skilled roles [...] With the state pension age rising it is very important to find ways to enable individuals to work, both through government and employer support.”

Technology - Looking and learning

By Richard Waters

These days, arranging to meet friends for dinner, organising business meetings or going on a trip can lead to a convoluted tangle. Life becomes an endless round of juggling message streams, bouncing between emails, checking online calendars, trawling review sites, researching prices and completing transactions. And that is before the endless revisions that follow, as flights are delayed or friends change their minds.

Smartphones and apps may have brought unprecedented choice and freedom, but these benefits have come at the expense of acute cognitive overload.

The frustration is expressed by Sebastian Thrun, a computer scientist and former head of the Google X research labs. "I wish these things would solve themselves," he says. "I wish I just had to think of buying a plane ticket, and didn't have to go through this lengthy dialogue to explain it to somebody else. Eventually, I would love to just have some smart system sit in my brain and solve these problems for me."

The brain implants are not ready yet, but artificial intelligence of a different kind is being let loose on some of these creeping problems of modern life.

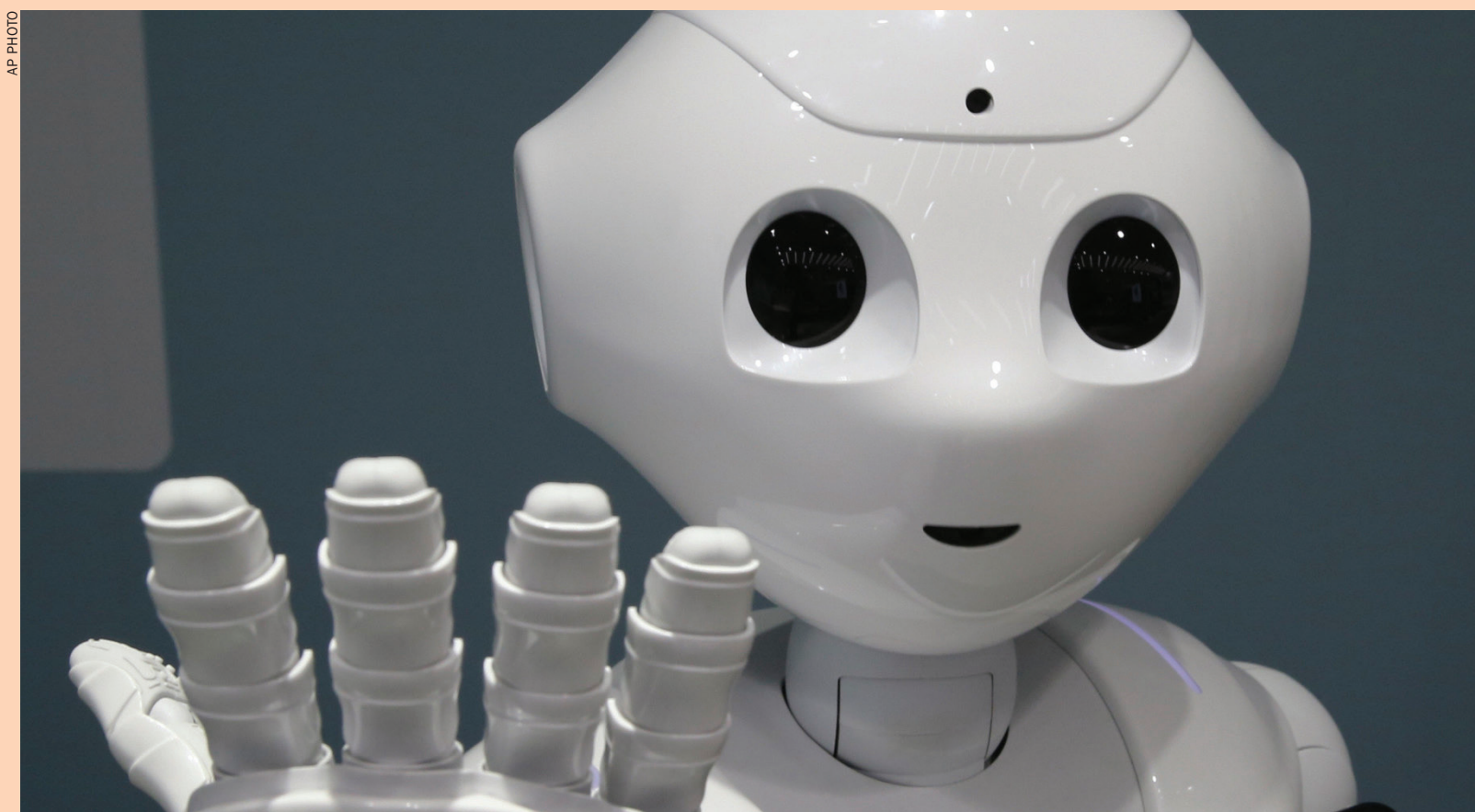
Supposedly "intelligent" digital assistants with names like Siri, Alexa and Cortana represent the latest front in the war between the leading consumer technology companies. Embedded in some of the most widely used devices and internet services, they are designed to respond to ordinary language, anticipate what users are likely to need next or take on basic tasks.

If the human brain cannot take the strain, they are there to shoulder some of the information processing burden. Whether providing direct answers to spoken questions, sending warnings when traffic problems might make you late for a meeting or automatically putting appointments in your calendar, the aim is the same: to make digital existence less of a chore.

It has not been an unalloyed success. Like precocious children, they often surprise with their technical virtuosity - only to disappoint with their remarkable obtuseness when confronted with what can seem, to a human intellect, the most basic of requests.

"They're either 100 percent great or they disappoint completely," says Tim Tuttle, chief executive of MindMeld, a San Francisco company that has built a platform for language-based assistants. "That's something about natural language systems that isn't true about lots of other [digital] experiences."

Human-sounding AI machines like Hal in 2001: A Space Odyssey and the avatar with sex appeal in Her, about a love affair with a Siri-like assistant, have made the idea of an all-knowing digital aide seem deceptively simple. "Popular



AP PHOTO

culture sets a high bar," says Matthew Quinlan, director of product marketing for Microsoft's Cortana, a digital assistant imbued with the personality of a sassy young woman. "We're all learning. It's the very early stages."

A spate of product launches and upgrades in recent weeks has brought the intelligent agents to more devices and services, increasing their reach and embedding them more deeply into everyday digital processes.

This week, Google slipped an in-

Mr Quinlan at Microsoft says this cross-device reach has already turned out to be one of the most popular features of the agents. Set a reminder using Cortana, for instance, and it can follow you from a Windows 10 computer to an Xbox or an Android smartphone.

The assistants are also becoming more useful by linking to third-party services. It is now possible to order an Uber by simply asking for one from an iPhone, an Amazon Echo speaker or a Windows 10 computer. Rather than open an app, the assis-

runner of Siri, says today's systems remain frustratingly limited. Both the underlying data models that try to capture some of the basic patterns of human language, as well as the machine learning algorithms that are let loose on them, fall short of capturing the bewildering range of human speech, he says.

"The Achilles heel of systems like this is the user expectations. When you tell people they can say anything to them, they will say anything," says Mr Hodjat.

But even without solving the deep problems of natural language understanding - something that might not be possible until computers can match human-level intelligence - other developments suggest the artificial agents will soon become much more useful.

One area of development involves product design. Devices or services that are set to handle a narrow range of useful activities can help to limit the expectations and provide a more fulfilling experience.

Amazon's Echo, a smart speaker that sits in the home and responds to questions or handles purchases, has become an unlikely hit, prompting Google to line up a copycat device. Mr Thrun calls it "an eye-opening experience, that I can have an expert in my building and I don't have to take something out of my pocket, don't have to push a button, and it just works".

Another field of development involves "socialising" AI machines in ways that make them seem less alien. The designers of today's agents have made only a very rudimentary attempt to make them acceptable to humans, says Ms Cassell: "They have some canned jokes, they have a thin veneer of personality, and their language doesn't change as they get to know you." This is very different from human speech, she says. Two strangers who talk for as little as 15 minutes

speaking differently as they relax and start to trust each other. Making interactions with machines more like this could go a long way to making them feel more "natural".

A third area of development involves personalisation. As they learn more about their human minders, intelligent agents promise to be far more useful. In the process, though, they will stir up important questions about privacy.

"The relationship with a personal assistant is based on trust," says Mr Quinlan at Microsoft. Users will have to feel they are receiving significant benefits in return for inviting the digital intelligences so deeply into their lives. "The quantity of information could be very significant."

With the Echo, says Mr Thrun, "you're putting a device in your kitchen that by definition listens to you all the time and you trust Amazon to do the right thing".

The deep level of trust the new smart assistants will demand stretches beyond privacy. To fulfil their potential, they will have to take over low-level tasks: adjusting travel bookings when circumstances change, updating calendar entries, making routine purchases.

That gives rise to important questions of computer agency. "How do you deploy them in ways that are safe and have boundaries on the actions they can take?" says Jeff Dean, a senior fellow at Google. Users are likely to become more comfortable with granting more authority to their agents as they come to trust them, says Mr Quinlan.

Where will we draw the line? Today's digital helpers barely qualify as intelligent. But it will not be long before they provoke more profound questions about the future of human and machine codependence.

Today's digital helpers barely qualify as intelligent

intelligent agent into its new messaging app, Allo. Lurking in the background as it monitors exchanges between humans, it suggests things people might want to say to each other next. It also analyses images: receive a picture of a friend's pet, for instance, and it might suggest you respond "cute dog!" - a seemingly simple trick that draws on what is still some of the most advanced AI.

Allo conjures up an eerie future of machine and human interaction in which people exchange strings of messages that have been fed to them by artificial intelligence. Google, however, brushes off any suggestion that this intrudes on human will, saying arguing this is no more intrusive than a spellcheck system.

Meanwhile, Apple's Siri, Microsoft's Cortana and Amazon's Alexa have been upgraded to make them more useful. This has included planting them in more devices. Alexa, a voice assistant developed first for Amazon's Echo household device, is now available for other hardware makers to use in their own products. Siri has been installed on Mac computers.

tant calls on the service direct.

Improvements in speech recognition technology and other advances had led to a steady increase in the uptake of voice-activated systems. Microsoft recently said it had 100 million users a month for Cortana, while Apple claims 2 billion interactions a week over Siri. Google says one-fifth of the searches on Android phones in the US are carried out by voice.

As technically adept as the digital assistants are becoming, they still fall short in important ways. Part of the problem stems from the high expectations they give rise to. "A human voice - particularly a recorded human voice - leads us to believe there's a real human capability there, and that can lead to trouble," says Justine Cassell, director of human-computer interaction at Carnegie Mellon University.

Divining the meaning of human utterances - something known in computing as natural language understanding - is one of the hardest problems in computer science. Babak Hodjat, an AI expert who worked on a natural language system 20 years ago that was a fore-

AP PHOTO



A destroyed ambulance is seen outside the Syrian Civil Defense main center after airstrikes in Ansari neighborhood in the rebel-held part of eastern Aleppo



In this photo provided by the Syrian Civil Defense group known as the White Helmets, Syrians inspect damaged buildings after airstrikes hit in Aleppo

By Edith M. Lederer,
United Nations

Syria believes it's on way to military victory

SYRIA'S top diplomat told the world's nations Saturday that his country's belief in military victory is greater now because the army "is making great strides in its war against terrorism" with support from Russia, Iran and Lebanon's Hezbollah fighters.

Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem said Syria is more determined than ever to eliminate "terrorism" from the country. The Syrian government refers to all those fighting to overthrow President Bashar Assad as "terrorists," including Western-backed opposition groups.

Al-Moallem accused the "moderate armed opposition" of committing crimes and massacres against Syrians "that are no less barbaric" than those of the Islamic State extremist group and al-Qaida. The Syrian government in turn has been accused by the U.S. and other Western nations of the indiscriminate killing of civilians, dropping bombs filled with chlorine gas as a chemical weapon, and torturing and killing opponents.

The Syrian official addressed the U.N. General Assembly's annual ministerial meeting after frantic but unsuccessful efforts by the U.S. and Russian foreign ministers to revive a cease-fire that came into effect on Sept. 12 but collapsed after a week following attacks by both sides. The truce was aimed at enabling the delivery of desperately needed humanitarian aid and paving the way for

a resumption of talks between the government and opposition.

Syria was stepping up its military campaign even as talks were taking place between U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on the sidelines of the U.N. meeting on reviving the cease-fire.

As of Saturday, rebel-held parts of the city of Aleppo had come under a blistering wave of airstrikes that residents said was without precedent in the 5 1/2-year conflict which has killed over 300,000 people and driven half the country's population from their homes. The airstrikes killed dozens, toppled buildings and sent wounded people flooding into poorly equipped clinics.

Aid was never delivered to Aleppo, and on Saturday government forces captured an area on the edge of the city, tightening their siege around the rebel-held east.

Global reaction was swift and condemned the new Syrian offensive in harsh terms.

U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon "is appalled by the chilling military escalation" in Aleppo and underlines that the use of indiscriminate weapons including incendiary devices and bunker buster bombs in densely populated areas "may amount to war crimes," his

spokesman said, adding that Ban considers this "a dark day for the global commitment to protect civilians."

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, called the bombing of Aleppo "beyond the pale," accusing the Syrian government of "laying siege in medieval terms to an entire community." Speaking at Tufts University in Boston, he demanded that Russia help bring peace to Syria instead of "an unacceptable precedent [...] for the entire world."

Al-Moallem said the Syrian government remains committed to political negotiations in Geneva under U.N. auspices but he stressed that any solution must follow two parallel tracks: intensified counter-terrorism efforts and an intra-Syrian dialogue that allows Syrians to determine their future "without foreign interference."

He said a political solution should begin "by establishing a government of national unity comprising representatives from the government and the opposition, in all its factions, and tasked with creating a constitution drafting committee."

Once a new constitution is approved by Syrians through a referendum, he said, parliamentary elections should follow leading to formation of

a new government.

That proposal is contrary to the roadmap for a Syrian political transition adopted by key nations in Geneva in June 2012 including the five permanent U.N. Security Council members — the U.S., Russia, China, Britain and France — that has been the basis of subsequent Geneva talks.

It starts with the establishment of a transitional governing body, vested with full executive powers, and ends with elections, and requires Assad to relinquish power at some unspecified point.

Al-Moallem made no mention of Assad stepping down as president and envisioned a

As of Saturday, rebel-held parts of the city of Aleppo had come under a blistering wave of airstrikes that residents said was without precedent

military victory — something Russia, the U.S. and the U.N. say is impossible.

"Our belief in victory is even greater now that the Syrian Arab Army is making great strides in its war against terrorism, with the support of the true friends of the Syrian people, notably the Russian Federation, Iran and the Lebanese national resistance," al-Moallem said. He was referring to Lebanon's Shiite Hezbollah militia.

Syria's uprising began in March 2011 with mostly peaceful protests against the Assad family's four-decade rule, but escalated into a civil war following a brutal government crackdown and the rise of an armed insurgency.

Al-Moallem accused Qatar and Saudi Arabia of spreading "terrorism" in Syria by sending in "mercenaries equipped with the most sophisticated weapons." He also accused Turkey of opening its border "to let in tens of thousands of terrorists from all over the world," and providing them with military and logistical support.

The Syrian minister reiterated the government's condemnation "in the strongest possible terms" of a U.S. attack on a Syrian army site near Deir El-Zour airport on Sept. 17, which he said allowed Islamic State fighters to gain control of the site.

"The Syrian government holds the United States fully responsible for this aggression, because facts show that it was an intentional attack, and not an error, even if the United States claims otherwise," he said. AP

Africa is divided over ivory trade



A Zimbabwe National Parks official is seen inspecting the country's ivory stockpile

Christopher Torchia,
Johannesburg

AFRICA is divided over whether to sell the ivory of its elephants, whose continent-wide population has plummeted because of poaching.

Namibia, Zimbabwe and South Africa will argue for the right to sell ivory at an international wildlife conference that starts Saturday in Johannesburg. They are opposed by about 30 African countries that want to tighten an international ban on the ivory trade amid growing concern over elephants, which have been slaughtered in the tens of thousands in re-

cent years.

Additional resistance to the pro-trade lobby includes a plan by China, the world's main ivory consumer, to close its domestic market. The United States has announced a near-total ban on the domestic sale of African elephant ivory.

Namibia has said it does not expect the Johannesburg talks at the meeting the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, or CITES, to go in its favor. It has argued that it has a large elephant population that often comes into conflict with communities, and that funds from ivory sales can go back into conservation pro-

grams.

South Africa supports Namibian and Zimbabwean proposals for international ivory sales, said Edna Molewa, South Africa's environment minister. While there is opposition from "some African brothers on the continent," southern countries with robust elephant populations should not be treated the same way as other nations hit hard by elephant poaching, she told foreign correspondents last week.

Some 3,500 delegates are expected to attend the meeting of the CITES group, which has 183 member countries and aims to ensure that international trade in wild animals and plants does not threaten their survival. Proposals that are put to a vote require a two-thirds majority to be accepted.

CITES had allowed a one-off sale of elephant ivory that was completed in 2009. In that sale, ivory from Botswana, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe went to China and Japan.

The number of savannah elephants in Africa dropped by about 30 percent from 2007 to 2014 because of poaching, according to a recent study. **AP**

Warmer waters might prevent baby lobsters from surviving

Patrick Whittle, Portland

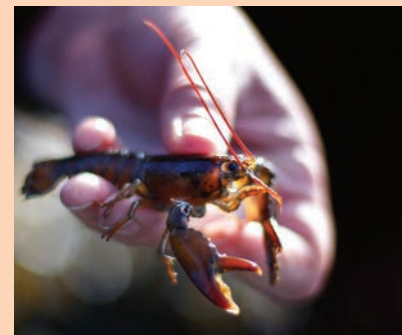
BABY lobsters might not be able to survive in the ocean's waters if the ocean continues to warm at the expected rate.

That is the key finding of a study performed by scientists in Maine, the state most closely associated with lobster. The scientists, who are affiliated with the University of Maine Darling Marine Center and Bigelow Laboratory for Ocean Sciences, said the discovery could mean bad news for the future of one of America's most beloved seafood treats, as well as the industry lobsters support.

The scientists found that lobster larvae struggled to survive when they were reared in water 5 degrees Fahrenheit warmer than the temperatures that are currently typical of the western Gulf of Maine, a key lobster fishing area off of New England. Five degrees is how much the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change expects the Gulf of Maine's temperature to warm by the year 2100.

The paper appears this month in the scientific journal *ICES Journal of Marine Science*. It could serve as a wake-up call that the lobster fishery faces a looming climate crisis that is already visible in southern New England, said Jessica Waller, one of the study's authors.

"There has been a near total collapse in Rhode Island, the southern end of the fishery, and we know our waters are getting warmer," Waller said. "We are hoping this research can be a jumping off point for more



research into how lobsters might do over the next century."

Right now, the country's lobster catch is strong, prices are high and steady and the industry is opening up new markets in Asia, where a growing middle class is hungry for one of America's seafood status symbols.

U.S. fishermen have topped 100 million pounds of lobster for seven years in a row after having never previously reached that mark, and their catch topped a half billion dollars in value at the docks for the first time in 2014.

But signs of the toll warming waters can do to the fishery are noticeable in its southern reaches, where scientists have said rising temperatures are contributing to the lobsters' decline. The lobster catch south of Cape Cod fell to about 3.3 million pounds in 2013, 16 years have it peaked at about 22 million in 1997.

The study's authors found higher temperatures caused baby lobsters to develop faster — something that could help them avoid predators in the wild — but few survived. They performed the work by raising more than 3,000 baby lobsters from the moment they hatched. **AP**

ASK THE VET

By Dr Ruan Du Toit Bester



ACRAL LICK GRANULOMA TREATMENT WITH VETERINARY LASER SURGERY

Acral lick granuloma is a frustrating skin disorder which vets are often forced to treat on a trial and error basis, because no single treatment method has proven consistently effective. Veterinary laser surgery is a new treatment option for lick granuloma which is gaining widespread praise for successful outcomes. Here's some information about the illness and this popular procedure as performed at Royal Veterinary Center.

CANINE LICK GRANULOMA

The condition is a dermatitis affecting dogs. It is caused by a dog's constant, compulsive licking of an area - usually on the lower front legs or carpal region, just above the paws. The tissue in this area is inflamed by the licking. Hair falls off, skin thickens and becomes red and ulcerated. The skin starts to itch and that makes the dog lick more until the inflamed area cannot heal. This makes the dog lick even more

The vicious cycle continues and creates aggravating conditions such as secondary infection. If you see your dog licking

its front paws more than usual, check for raised, hairless, red patches of thickened skin in the area and see your vet if you find them.

DIAGNOSIS

No single lick granuloma treatment method can be selected until a vet determines what actually started the dog's behavior. It could have a psychological origin like stress or anxiety. Some dogs lick because it imparts a feeling of comfort or well-being. This has been attributed to the release of chemicals in the dog's brain called endorphins. In other words, licking releases brain chemicals that make some dogs feel so good that they can't stop licking.

There may be some underlying medical problem such as a tumor, trauma or parasites. Any of these and other things can start the cycle, and each possible root cause requires a different treatment modality.

Be patient and remember that the process of finding an origin for the disorder in any individual case can be long and challenging. A number of skin tests and

other diagnostic procedures may be necessary and your vet may interview you extensively about when the licking started and when it seems at its worst.

LASER SURGERY

Whatever the cause of the lick granuloma, any treatment must repair the inflamed tissue if the licking is to stop. This is where laser surgery has been beneficial in many cases.

When a veterinary surgeon uses a laser light on the inflamed tissue, the thickened, diseased layers of skin are burned away. Nerve tissue in that area is sealed at the same time, so the dog experiences almost no pain and there is very little bleeding associated with the treatment.

The final stage of treatment will focus on reducing or eliminating the compulsive licking. This could involve anything from covering the affected area with a protective shield, up to and including prescribing anti-depressants or tranquilizers, or coating the repaired tissue area with something that tastes bad to discourage more licking.



If your vet does not offer laser treatments, he or she can refer you to a vet who does.

Hope this info helps
Till next week
Dr Ruan

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