



## Life Support: My dog has a biochemist

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By Julie Long

"Something smells delicious," my husband comments as he comes through the door.

Our two English bulldogs obviously agree. They are strategically positioned under my feet to catch anything that drops from the stove. In a stockpot, chicken simmers with olive oil, garlic, potatoes and celery.

Unfortunately, this dish I've spent the afternoon making is not for my hardworking husband. It's for Lucy, one of our dogs. She already hogs our bed, now she's raiding the fridge.

Lucy has severe allergies. Chicken stew is the latest diet prescribed in an effort to stop her from chewing her paws and rubbing her belly raw. First there was white fish and spinach. Then ground lamb with sweet potatoes and carrots. Most recently, it was organic eggs and free-range chicken breast. Each diet works for a while, then her system overrides it and she starts scratching again.

"It smells good enough to be people food," my husband says.

And it is. A nutritious dinner the whole family can eat, according to Lucy's biochemist. Yes, my dog has a biochemist; I don't even have a primary care physician.

"What's in the other pot?" my husband asks.

More chicken stew for the dog. We're leaving for vacation tomorrow and, as I can't ask the dog-sitter to slave over a hot stove, I need to make a week's supply.

There was a time I would have thought canine biochemistry was going too far. That was before I started taking Sherman, our other dog, for acupuncture. A birth defect in his spine is causing his back legs to go numb and atrophy. Biweekly treatments have staved off the progression for three years. He's not in pain, the vet assures me, and so far he can still do what he loves: play fetch. When the day comes he doesn't bring us a toy to toss, we'll know he's ready to call it quits. I think he's holding out for canine robotics. In the meantime, his vet is suggesting an experimental wonder drug. At this rate, he may become the Six Million Dollar Dog.

How did we come to this? And by "we" I don't just mean my family. As a nation the U.S. spends nearly \$12 billion annually on veterinary care for our canines. According to a recent Wall Street Journal article, the lifetime cost of a dog -- be it a pound puppy or purebred --

starts around \$10,000 and can be as much as \$23,000.

I don't dare add up what we've invested so far. In addition to what I've already owned up to, let me now confess to a drawer full of puppy supplements and to several surgical procedures: three for torn knee ligaments, two for eye problems, and one to remove a tennis ball from Sherman's stomach. We tried to buy pet insurance but our dogs had too many pre-existing conditions to qualify. The fact that pet insurance even exists only proves the spiraling state of things.

I do take some comfort knowing we're not the only pet owners spending a fortune. I have friends who just finished paying for their dog's orthodontia -- and no, it wasn't cosmetic. Another friend's dog had to have steel rods put in her front legs after a nasty tumble down the stairs. And I recently learned of a vet performing life-saving surgery on a goldfish.

People without pets think we're crazy. But what choice do we have, really? We love our animals and veterinary science has progressed to the point that putting them down is a last resort we can indefinitely postpone.

So we lament the dogs' credit card bill (yes, we have a card just for their expenses), and we put major household purchases on hold. It's ironic: The dogs have run our house into the ground, and we can't afford to refurbish because we're spending our disposable income keeping them alive.

And feeding them like royalty.

My husband lifts a lid off a pot. "If this is for Lucy, what are we having for dinner?"

With a hundred things still to do before we leave, I suggest pizza.

He sighs and tentatively takes a taste of the stew. "Hey, it's delicious. Can I eat this?"

"No!" I tell him. If he eats the stew then Lucy will run out while we're away. She'll be forced to eat kibble.

My husband, on the other hand, doesn't have any allergies. Maybe I'll ask the biochemist if he can eat the kibble.

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[Back](#)

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