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Letters to the Editor

Pruritus in dogs

We have noticed the frequent use of the term '*pruritus sine materia*' in recent *Veterinary Dermatology* articles dealing with canine atopic dermatitis.[1–4] This term seems to be used to describe pruritus without macroscopically visible clinical lesions in dogs.

Pruritus (or itch) is classically defined both in humans and in animals as 'an unpleasant sensation that provokes the desire to scratch'.[5,6] It is one of the most frequent reasons for owners to present their animal to a veterinarian.[5] Various dermatological (and less frequently nondermatological) conditions may be responsible for pruritus in dogs, allergy being one of the most common underlying causes.[3] Pruritus may be classified as epicritic (localized) versus protopathic (poorly localized), acute versus chronic and clinical versus symptom oriented.[5] A position paper from the International Forum for the Study of Itch has proposed the following six aetiological classes of pruritus in man: dermatological, systemic, neurological, psychogenic, mixed and idiopathic.[7]

In some instances, such as in canine atopic dermatitis and especially in young dogs or puppies, pruritus can initially be seen without any associated clinical signs (i.e. no visible skin lesion).[1] Dermatological lesions such as papules, excoriations, erosions, ulcers, self-induced alopecia and lichenification follow later on in the course of the disease and are then considered as secondary to the itching sensation. The temporal relationship between the onset of pruritus and the presence of lesions is potentially useful to differentiate some of the causes of the skin disease for a dog. We agree that we frequently see dogs in our practice presented with pruritus without any associated skin lesion and it is out of the scope of this letter to underline the fact that many of these animals are finally diagnosed as suffering from atopic dermatitis. However, the use of the term '*pruritus sine materia*' to characterize these dogs is likely to be inappropriate.

In human medicine the term '*pruritus sine materia*' is used to describe acute or chronic cases of pruritus without any associated dermatological cause that are associated, in particular, with various systemic diseases (see Table 1).[8] It has been recently renamed as 'pruritus of primarily noninflamed skin'. In general, *pruritus sine materia* is considered as a potential marker of malignancy in cases of haematological cancer.[7] The use of this term is therefore strictly limited to particular patients in most human dermatology textbooks and articles.

As the situation is different in veterinary dermatology, especially because only very rare cases of internal diseases causing pruritus have been reported in dogs,[9] it seems logical to us to avoid the use of the term '*pruritus sine materia*' to characterize signs of allergic skin disease. In cases with pruritus without visible skin lesions, notably in atopic dermatitis, we propose that the use of the terms 'alesional pruritus' or 'pruritus without lesion' should be preferred in the future.

Table 1. List of selected diagnoses associated with *pruritus sine materia* in human dermatology[7]

Chronic renal disease
Cholestasis
Endocrine disease (e.g. thyrotoxicosis, hypothyroidism)
Haematological disease (e.g. Sézary syndrome, Hodgkin's disease)
Iron deficiency
Toxocariasis

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