LOGAN: Hello! Today we are joined with Dr. Rachel Barton to discuss heartworm treatment programs for shelter dogs. Dr. Barton is the Chief Veterinarian at Tallahassee Animal Services and she has been for 15 years and she’s also a fellow in the Maddie’s Shelter Medicine Fellowship Program this year put on by- I don’t know why, I’m so sorry. The-

BARTON: No worries!

LOGAN: The second part of this has the old introduction and so that’s why I was like “Wait, where did it go?”. Okay I’m just going to start over. Sorry about that. Okay. Hello! Today we are joined by Dr. Rachel Barton to discuss heartworm treatment programs for shelter dogs. Dr. Barton has been the veterinarian at Tallahassee Animal Services for 15 years and serves as the Chief Veterinarian. She completed a master’s degree in shelter medicine and is a fellow in the Maddie’s Shelter Medicine Fellowship Program hosted by UC Davis and the University of Wisconsin. Thank you so much for joining us!

BARTON: Thanks for inviting me today.

LOGAN: Yes! So could you briefly describe the heartworm treatment protocol for dogs in your shelter?

BARTON: Sure. Our protocol is based on the American Heartworm Society’s protocol. It’s a little bit modified for our shelter and it certainly has morphed and changed over the years, but typically what we do, as soon as we identify a dog as being heartworm positive, we go ahead and start them on doxycycline. We use the 10 miligrams per kilogram dose recommended by the American Heartworm Society. We give it twice a day for 30 days, for a month. We also will start the dogs on heartworm prevention. We like them to have at least two doses of heartworm prevention before they go through heartworm treatment, although sometimes they’ll have three doses before we actually get to the injections. Once they’ve completed their doxycycline and have had their at least two doses of heartworm prevention, then they are able to be scheduled for the melarsomine injections. We are following a two dose protocol. So it would be the original, old school, two injections given 24 hours apart. However, we adopt our dogs out before they are ready to get those injections. So we are scheduling heartworm treatment appointments for our adopters. They come back to the shelter for no charge and we provide those injections. We will disclose to the adopters about the differences between the two injection and the three injection protocol. We did a lot of research and a lot of consideration about the statistics and what we would or wouldn’t gain by doing that third injection. And we decided in-house that it was best if we just did the two injection protocol here in the shelter. But we explain all of that to the adopters. And many of our adopters elect to pay for the first injection at their family veterinarian and then coordinate with us to schedule our two injections as their second and third injections so that the dogs are actually getting the three injection protocol. It’s just we’re covering part of the cost by doing injections two and three, and they cover part of the cost by doing injection one at their family veterinarian. After they’ve received the injections, then we will send them home with prednisone. And again, we follow the recommendation of the American Heartworm Society with the three weeks of prednisone on a decreasing dose cycle. Now I didn’t mention on the day of treatment, we pretreat all of our dogs with prednisone, gabapentin, and buprenorphine, and that’s for the pain control but also to help sedate them and make them a little bit easier to work with while we’re doing those intramuscular injections of the melarsomine.

LOGAN: Great, and do you perform another heartworm antigen test after the treatment to determine success?

BARTON: We do, well we recommend that another heartworm test may be done. It may be done at the shelter if the dog is back in the system with us. Otherwise, we just recommend that they follow up with their family vet now. We used to recommend to do that at about 6 months post-treatment and now we recommend somewhere between 9 and 12 months post-treatment to follow up with their family vet to have that heartworm antigen test run. If they are still positive a year out, we will follow-up and offer additional treatment. We will communicate with the pharmaceutical company about the case and if the owner elects to provide treatment again, we will also do that at no cost to the owner here at the shelter.

LOGAN: Very nice. Where are dogs usually housed during the various stages of heartworm treatment?

BARTON: Excellent question. So as I mentioned with our protocol, as soon as we identify that they’re heartworm positive, we’ll go ahead and start them down the path of heartworm treatment with doxycycline and heartworm prevention. We try to get our dogs adopted out, we don’t want heartworm treatment to delay adoption. So most of the time, the dogs will leave the system, leave the shelter and be in an adoptive home or a foster home and then come back to the shelter for those injections, and then go back to their adoptive home or their foster home. However, we also have a program, it’s on hold due to the coronavirus pandemic, but pre-pandemic and hopefully post-pandemic, we have a program that’s a partnership with one of the state prisons where we provide the heartworm treatment at the shelter and then the dogs go and live at the prison with the inmates where they have their convalescent period. So they’re getting their prednisone, they’re doing their restricted activity living in the prison with the inmates. And that’s actually been a wonderful program for us because these dogs are on crate rest but they’re still getting enrichment, so much more enrichment than your regular owned pet would be. Because normally, your pet is on crate rest and you go to work all day. These dogs are doing non-energetic training activities with the inmates. I would argue that our heartworm treatment dogs in the prison program actually have a better quality of life while they’re going through the cage rest time, which usually can be pretty boring and frustrating for dogs in the home environment.

LOGAN: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. That’s actually really cool. Have you identified some things in the heartworm treatment program that you would like to do differently?

BARTON: I think the biggest challenge that we have for our heartworm treatment program is not the medical side but the administrative side. One of my technicians is in charge of following-up with all the adopters and scheduling the appointments and getting the consent form signed and following-up to remind people and it’s a lot of work. There’s a lot of hand-holding and a lot of education and conversation that goes along with it. But I wish that we had a clinic manager or a support staff person that I could hand that off to because I am taking away from what that technician can do with the animals here in the shelter by giving her those administrative duties.

LOGAN: That makes sense. Thank you so much for joining us again and we really enjoyed having you.

BARTON: Thank you, I’ve enjoyed talking about our heartworm program with you.