

I think a lot of people realize that veterinary medicine can present some challenges that are different than what happens in human medicine. Certainly, there are many similarities owing to the fact that many of our companions have similar physiologies and structures to our own. However, the main challenge arises from the fact that our patients in veterinary medicine are not as communicative to us as veterinarians when compared with humans and their physicians. I have seldom had a patient “tell me where it hurts.”

This challenge is one of the reasons, and there are many, why veterinary medicine is so fascinating. It is also the main reason diagnostics can be so important in veterinary medicine. This is especially important with some of the less than mainstream species that some people choose as companions. Lou is one of those species. He is a bearded dragon lizard.

Lou lives in a large cage and is well taken care of by Brandon. Lou is five years old and has been with Brandon for most of those five years with no health issues. That no longer appears to be the case. Lou has decided he does not want to eat. For Lou this is highly unusual as, according to Brandon, he usually eats every chance he gets. Apparently, for the last ten days or so, he has changed his ways and has not touched anything Brandon has offered.

That is all the information I have to go on, so it appears I am going to have to use one of my more primitive diagnostic tools, my crystal ball. To be fair to Brandon, this is the single most common presentation for a reptile patient. When they are having health issues, they generally do not eat. This could be the result of a simple problem such as a sore mouth or as complicated and severe as terminal cancer. The common symptom is they do not eat. Therefore, in Lou’s case, and frankly in many cases of reptile illness, we start with the symptom of anorexia and look to a virtually unlimited list of disease possibilities.

Brandon obviously will need to bring Lou to his veterinarian for evaluation. I will share with you what I generally do when presented with an anorexic reptile patient and use Lou as an example. But do realize that every case has subtle and sometimes not so subtle differences, and the thoughts I share here may not be the same as another lizard case with the same symptom of anorexia. (The disclaimer!)

Physical examination is always an important diagnostic step, and Lou is no exception. Through this process, we can sometimes fine tune our approach to the necessary diagnostic steps to try to uncover Lou’s problem. Again with no clues in this particular case, I will be a bit more generalized.

I recommend Lou have some radiographs taken to “look inside” his little body and a blood panel drawn to check organ system functions. A fecal examination for parasites is also warranted.

These steps will provide a good overview of what might be going on with Lou and hopefully direct us to the next step, be it further diagnostic steps or treatment based on an illness discovered from the previous tests.

The best advice I can give, as I mentioned above, is bringing Lou to his veterinarian. Obviously, there is a problem and apparently after reading this article, my crystal ball is in need of repair.