

Christmas Marbles By Dr. Teri Weronko

It was late one December night. The ER had been quiet for a few hours, and I was starting to hope that we might be in that most blessed of states...a pre holiday lull. Maybe everyone was out at their company Christmas parties...or doing some kamikaze 24 hour shopping sprees. Maybe all the pets were tucked safely into their holiday beds, dreaming of schnitzel (instead of eating it, which would inevitably lead them to me...).

Maybe...but no, the doorbell intruded rudely into my fantasies and thus began one of my more bizarre holiday stories.

They were a jolly, Rockwellian looking family...mom, dad, little cherub children with rosy cheeks. And on the exam table stood Sam, the picture of a friendly family dog, waving his silky buff colored tail and exuding good will like only a happy Shih Tzu can. He seemed the picture of contented health. So what was the problem?

Dad began by apologizing for coming so late. "I'm not sure there IS a problem," he continued. "But you see, we were all out to dinner, except for Sam of course...and when we came home...well, the *entire* Chinese checker game we had all been playing...well, it was *gone*."

"Chinese checkers?" I enquired? "Yes, yes...Chinese checkers...the entire set...marbles, board, everything...just um, gone!"

Sam gazed at us all with innocent goodwill...I was thinking ...such a small dog...surely it wasn't possible...But yes it was. When I palpated the little belly before me the crunch and clack and slide of dozens of marbles could easily be felt. "Wow!" I murmured in what must have been my most comforting doctorly voice, Sam had the good grace to look a little abashed as he let out a terrific belch in response to my squeezing.

Radiographs confirmed it. Chinese Checker marble glass may have some lead in them, for they show up remarkably well on an X ray. Sam's little tummy was packed to the brim with them...and more than just the 60 marbles that come in a set. Standing roundly apart from their little brethren were bigger shooter marbles...honestly they looked impossibly big...how could it be? This innocent looking scamp in front of me had sucked down 3 score or more little AND big marbles as though they were delicious Swedish meatballs!

A family consultation ensued. The little marbles, I thought, might easily slide through the intestines...but what of the big ones? We could make him vomit, but there were so many, and because of its inaccessibility the esophagus is actually one of the more delicate parts of the digestive tract. I didn't think the marbles were toxic in any way...despite their fantastic radiolucency on the films,,but what of the cardboard board also missing, and presumably in there too, would it complicate the matter?

Surgery I decided was the safest option. As Sam's family waited in the front office my technician and I set to it. The unmistakable clack of each glass marble hitting steel surgery pan was answered with encouraging cheers from the waiting room.

In the end we removed 77 marbles, and a lot of soggy board game from Sam's tummy. And X rays confirmed a clean sweep....except for one little marble, which had raced ahead of his brethren and was sitting already in the distal colon. It joined its friends later, in a more traditional way!