

Veterinary Oncology: Debunking Pet Cancer Myths

Our first cohort of Veterinary Oncology students have now completed the new **Veterinary Oncology 1 module: Approach to the cancer patient, cancer pathology and surgical treatment of cancer.** We thought this a great opportunity to have an in-depth look at this growing designation along with an exclusive interview with module co-ordinator **Dr. Chiara Penzo** DVM PhD Dip.ECVIM(Oncology) MRCVS, EBVS European Veterinary Specialist in Small Animal Oncology, RCVS Recognised Specialist in Veterinary Oncology



CT scan: Diagnostic imaging plays a central role in cancer staging and treatment planning.

The Veterinary Postgraduate Unit at the University of Liverpool are now offering three Veterinary Oncology modules as part of the Certificate in Advanced Veterinary Practice (CertAVP).

The modules are aimed at veterinary practitioners looking to advance their knowledge in this field and improve their confidence and effectiveness when managing oncology cases in practice.

Each module can be completed individually as CPD, in combination with other C-modules to work towards the CertAVP, or all three modules in the series can be completed to be eligible for a designated CertAVP in Veterinary Oncology.

Each module runs for 12 weeks, is currently offered once per year and they can be completed in any order. Brand new content has been provided from leaders in the field covering all aspects of Veterinary Oncology. Topics include, approach to the cancer patient, management options, pathology of cancers affecting different body systems and palliative care. All while focusing on your clinical reasoning and with a logical evidence-based approach to these cases.

Below is a summary of each module:

Veterinary Oncology 1: Approach to the cancer patient, cancer pathology and surgical treatment of cancer.

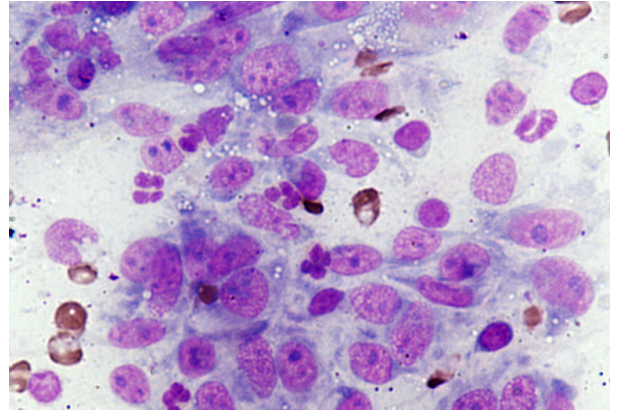
This module runs in January each year and consists of four study units where you will focus on your approach to the cancer patient, including diagnosis, staging and prognostication cover aspects of cancer pathology, understand the role of surgery in the treatment of cancer and finally management options of some of the common solid tumours of small animals.

“ All lectures have been brilliant, very up to date and well delivered.

Student Feedback

Veterinary Oncology 2: Cancer Biology and Medical Therapy for Cancer

This module starts in April each year and consists of three study units focusing on cancer biology and genetic basis, principles of chemotherapy with discussion of major cancer drugs and their mechanisms of action, toxicity and safe handling, and finally the diagnosis and management of haematopoietic tumours, including lymphomas and mast cell tumours.



Obtaining a cytological or histological diagnosis is a core principle of oncologic case management.

Veterinary Oncology 3: Cancer of body systems, advanced therapeutics and palliative care.

This module starts in September each year and the four study units focus on the diagnosis and management of specific malignancies of the nervous, endocrine, digestive, cardiorespiratory and reproductive system. It also covers, holistic and palliative care including analgesia and nutrition, advanced therapies, including radiotherapy, immunotherapy and electrochemotherapy and the epidemiology of cancer

“ Lecturers were knowledgeable and passionate about their topics (especially the module co-ordinator) who was inspiring and facilitated many advances in my knowledge of specific topics within the module especially adjunctive treatment options - many thanks for all of their hard work which clearly showed throughout the module. Content was thorough and valuable and applicable to general practice in many scenarios
Student Feedback

Bookings are now open for the **Veterinary Oncology 1** module starting on **5th January 2026**, the booking deadline for this is **16th November 2025**.

Book direct [here](#).

Exclusive Interview with Dr. Chiara Penzo: Leading the Way in Veterinary Oncology



Dr. Chiara Penzo

We were delighted to catch up with **Dr. Chiara Penzo**, DVM PhD Dip.ECVIM (Oncology) MRCVS, EBVS European Veterinary Specialist in Small Animal Oncology, RCVS Recognised Specialist in Veterinary Oncology, a trailblazer in veterinary oncology and **module coordinator** at the **University of Liverpool**, to discuss her passion for cancer care, education, and the future of veterinary oncology.

In 2009 Chiara was the first to be awarded the title of European Veterinary Specialist in Small Animal Oncology, ECVIM-CA (Oncology). Alongside her referral clinical activity in small animal oncology, Chiara is a multilingual specialist consultant and lecturer at events in the UK and Europe and is an Honorary Lecturer here at the University of Liverpool.

Q1. Chiara, thanks for taking the time to talk to us, let's start from the beginning, did you always want to be a vet?

Since I was a child, I was always playing doctor and caring for my toy animals. Growing up with pets, I saw how much they enrich our lives, and I knew I wanted to help keep them happy and well. Becoming a vet felt like a natural way to bring those passions together.

Q2. Tell us about your career to date; what inspired you to work in oncology.

Even before qualifying as a vet, I knew I wanted to pursue specialist training. My initial interest in oncology came through surgery, which led me to undertake two extended externships at cancer centers in Italy and the USA. Those experiences broadened my perspective and deepened my interest in all aspects of oncology—not just surgical intervention, but the holistic care of cancer patients. I became especially drawn to the vital role we play in guiding and supporting owners throughout their pet's cancer journey, offering both medical expertise and compassionate care.

Q3. How common is cancer in pets?

Multiple studies and pet cancer registries have shown that nearly 50% of dogs over the age of 10 will be diagnosed with cancer. While cancer is slightly less common in cats, it remains a significant concern—particularly as lymphoma is the most frequently diagnosed cancer across all feline age groups, including young cats. Strong breed predispositions also exist, with some dog breeds showing cancer rates as high as 55%. In addition, most pets will develop a lump at some point in their lives, often more than one. Lumps are among the most common clinical presentations in general practice and a frequent source of concern for pet owners.

“ Multiple studies and pet cancer registries have shown that nearly 50% of dogs over the age of 10 will be diagnosed with cancer”.

Q4. What are the biggest myths regarding pet cancer treatment and how can we change this?

Misconceptions about cancer in pets can delay diagnosis and treatment, often reducing the chance of a cure.

Many believe a cancer diagnosis means a poor prognosis, but with early detection and expert care, many cancers are treatable and manageable. Owners often worry that treatment will make pets sick, but veterinary oncology focuses on maintaining quality of life—something cancer itself would compromise.

Pets don't lose all their hair during chemo, and age alone isn't a reason to avoid treatment if the pet is otherwise healthy. Moreover young pets can also be affected. While advanced cases can be more complex and costly, early diagnosis often leads to simpler, more effective, and more affordable care. We can change these myths by educating owners, sharing success stories, and emphasizing early diagnosis and quality of life as the heart of cancer care.

“ *with early detection and expert care, many cancers are treatable and manageable.* ”



Many elements influence the prognosis, including tumour size.

Q5. What are the most common types of cancer your encounter with animals and how do you approach their treatment?

The most common cancers in dogs and cats are lymphoma and mammary tumors. In dogs, other frequent cancers include mast cell tumors, sarcomas (such as osteosarcoma and hemangiosarcoma), and melanoma. In cats, cutaneous and oral squamous cell carcinomas are also commonly seen.

Most cancers are treatable and manageable, and prognosis depends on a timely and accurate diagnosis, along with proper clinical staging, that are essential to guide treatment decisions. This allows owners to make informed choices based on objective, evidence-based information—without unnecessary delays based on unfounded worries.

Early intervention helps preserve quality of life, improves outcomes, and reduces the emotional burden on families by avoiding preventable suffering, uncertainty, and guilt.

Q6. Can you tell us about electrochemotherapy, why would you choose this over other treatment?

Electrochemotherapy (ECT) is a local treatment that combines chemotherapy with electrical pulses to enhance drug uptake by tumour cells.

It's often chosen when surgery isn't feasible or would require radical procedures—such as in the oral cavity, nasal planum, eyelids, or distal limbs. ECT is also useful when complete surgical removal isn't possible, or when radiotherapy isn't available or appropriate. It offers a less invasive, cost-effective alternative with minimal side effects thanks to localized drug delivery.

The procedure is typically performed on an outpatient basis, often under sedation, and most pets go home the same day with minimal aftercare. It can also be safely repeated if needed.

Q7. What would you say is the biggest misconception of working in veterinary oncology?

The biggest misconception about working in veterinary oncology is that it's a sad and hopeless field, because cancer is often associated with suffering, death and treatment complications. In reality, many pets diagnosed with cancer are still feeling well at the time of diagnosis—and with treatment, they often continue to feel well or return to normal.

A cancer diagnosis is not a death sentence. Today, many cancers in pets are treatable, and some are even curable. Most importantly, pets generally tolerate treatment far better than people expect, with quality of life remaining the top priority throughout care.

Q8. What do you find the most rewarding aspect of veterinary oncology?

The most rewarding aspect of veterinary oncology is the privilege of helping owners honour the deep bond they share with their pets—especially when that bond is threatened by a cancer diagnosis. It's incredibly meaningful to offer hope, clarity, and support in the face of common misconceptions and fear.

It's also a profound honour to be trusted with some of the most intimate moments in a pet's life, particularly during palliative care and at the end of life. Being able to guide families with compassion and knowledge through those times is both humbling and deeply fulfilling.

“ *The biggest misconception about working in veterinary oncology is that it's a sad and hopeless field* ”

Q9. How do you stay updated with the latest research and development in oncology?

Staying current in veterinary oncology is essential, not only because the field evolves rapidly, but also as part of the requirements for maintaining specialist accreditation every five years. In addition to active clinical practice, I regularly read peer-reviewed journals such as Veterinary and Comparative Oncology and the Journal of Veterinary Internal Medicine, which publish cutting-edge research on cancer biology, diagnostics, and emerging therapies.

I also contribute to the field by reviewing manuscripts prior to publication and engaging in clinical research aimed at advancing veterinary oncology. These activities ensure that I remain at the forefront of new developments and continue to deliver the highest standard of care to my patients.

In addition to keeping up with the literature, I attend international oncology conferences, webinars, and specialist meetings to stay informed about emerging treatments such as immunotherapy, electrochemotherapy, and precision medicine. Engaging with colleagues and oncology networks, and participating in clinical discussions, allows me to apply the latest evidence-based approaches in practice.

I also learn every day from my patients and their families—their experiences continually shape how I deliver care. I'm deeply grateful for the trust they place in me during such a vulnerable time.



Surgery plays a key role in tumour management for many reasons.

Q10. Why should someone consider pursuing further training in oncology?

Pursuing a specialty in veterinary oncology is both intellectually stimulating and deeply meaningful. It offers the opportunity to work at the cutting edge of veterinary medicine—combining diagnostics, therapeutics, and compassionate care to improve and often extend the lives of pets with cancer.

It's a field where you can make a profound impact: not only by treating disease, but you become a trusted guide, helping owners navigate complex decisions with empathy and evidence-based care.

Oncology also offers constant learning. With rapid advancements in treatments like immunotherapy, electrochemotherapy, and precision medicine, it's a dynamic and evolving discipline. For those who are curious, compassionate, and committed to lifelong learning, oncology is an incredibly rewarding path. By deepening your knowledge in oncology, you have the opportunity to make a real difference—not just in treating cancer, but in changing the way it's perceived. There are still many misconceptions about cancer in pets, and by becoming a specialist, you can help shift those narratives with evidence-based care and compassionate communication.

Advancing your training in oncology also means helping to make cancer treatment more accessible and accepted, so that more pets—and their families—can benefit from the advances in veterinary oncology. It's a chance to combine science, empathy, and advocacy in a field where your impact is both immediate and lasting.

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