



What's up, Watson?

By Lara Darling

It's a sunny day as usual in Palo Alto, California. The breeze drifts through the open window of the studio, and it's a little after two. Watson the chihuahua sits at the feet of Servane Briand and stares patiently at her hands as she reaches into a small container. He receives a small piece of chicken as a midday treat. His back legs tremble, and he gradually gives in and collapses, the chicken momentarily forgotten. Watson has just experienced another narcoleptic attack. Watson has a condition called

narcolepsy, which is a sleeping disorder. "What's particular about people with narcolepsy is that they go straight into REM sleep, a stage of sleep that usually happens in the middle of the night when you are dreaming and paralyzed," says Dr. Emmanuel Mignot, "and patients with narcolepsy go straight from being awake to REM sleep." Because they go straight into REM sleep, people oftentimes have vivid dreams and hallucinations, or are awake but paralyzed. However, he says "the symptom that is the most odd is when patients get emotionally excited; when

they're laughing, smiling, joking, or something they suddenly feel weak and lose their muscle tone like during REM sleep. This is what is referred to as an attack; in the case of a strong attack the patient could even fall asleep completely. When Watson eats the chicken he gets so emotionally excited to get it, he suffers an attack and is paralyzed. Mignot estimates that he has about 100 attacks per day, most of which cause him to become a little weak in the legs; these are called partial attacks. Within a few seconds he wakes up and eats his chicken,

What is narcolepsy?

Narcolepsy is a sleeping disorder where the brain can't regulate sleeping and waking normally.

This can cause excessive daytime sleepiness, cataplexy, hallucinations, sleep paralysis, and attacks where the person (or dog) affected suddenly goes from being being awake to REM sleep and/or experience cataplexy where their muscles are paralyzed. The attacks are often-times triggered by a strong positive emotion.



and goes back to being the sweet dog that he is. Stanford Medicine states, "Narcolepsy is a frequent disorder: it is the second leading cause of excessive daytime sleepiness diagnosed by sleep centers after obstructive sleep apnea" ("About Narcolepsy"). The disease, while it can cause accidents, is not fatal, and it affects only dogs and humans. Narcolepsy in dogs is genetic, while in humans is usually triggered by something like the flu, usually around childhood or adolescence. Watson's immune system attacks the part of his brain that regulates sleep and wakefulness mistakenly, destroying hypocretin orexin, a chemical that usually belongs to one of the receptors. "The chemical that usually stimulated the

receptors was missing, so we know the cause of this [disease] is the lack of this chemical called hypocretin orexin. Watson doesn't have any hypocretin orexin, so when he gets a strong positive emotion he falls asleep" (Mignot). Briand says, "Sometimes on a walk, he will be so happy to be getting home with his owners that he gets an attack almost a block away home." However, when Watson is stressed or scared, this actually inhibits his attacks. Besides the attacks, symptoms can include cataplexy (sudden momentary loss of muscle), daytime drowsiness, and sleep paralysis, vivid and often terrifying hallucinations among others. Of course, the disease affects everyone differently; people have

different personalities and symptoms, and in dogs it's the same. Most people with the disease oftentimes have a lower quality of life because they can have accidents or have difficulty finding work. Mignot says it's mainly a social problem; sometimes people avoid social contact.

Imagine if you were hanging out with your friends, laughing and joking, and then suddenly you've become paralyzed. Since it develops at a fairly young age, children can't go to school or get teased. They need to have scheduled naps, and take care of themselves. However, when you are a small chihuahua and can fall asleep whenever you want, narcolepsy seems to be less disruptive in life. And of course, having an owner that happens to be a world-renowned expert on narcolepsy doesn't hurt.

Named after a combination of Watson and Crick, Sherlock's Watson, and Watson of IBM, this small dog has some big shoes to fill. He also has a big disease,

but he still manages to affect positively the people around him. He serves as a way to more easily understand narcolepsy, and he gives a fresh perspective. His pet sitter, Beth Newhall, says, "I have had a lot of dogs, but from the moment I met him I knew that there was something special about him, just how he acted there was something more to him than a normal dog. I was trying to figure it out, and I was thinking he was almost like a healing dog." She describes him as "very calm which is unusual for a chihuahua" (Newhall). Watson, while still playful, has a quality that puts people at ease. When he gets an attack, his legs are first to go. If it's a

bigger one, he falls to the ground and lays there for a few seconds. Then, he blinks his eyes sleepily, gets up, and carries on as usual. He doesn't usually seem to get agitated or distressed, he just keeps going on with his life. It's an ability that he has had to learn since he was young, and one he is still learning by learning to take it easier or get on softer surface when he feels an attack coming. Living with narcolepsy requires patience and learning strategies to be able to live as normally as possible. Two years ago, when Watson was a few months old, he was diagnosed. His owners just weren't equipped to properly care for a dog with a sleeping disorder and





decided to give him up. The vet then contacted Dr. Emmanuel Mignot, who accepted him. Mignot is the world-renowned expert on narcolepsy; in fact, he found the genetic cause of canine narcolepsy sixteen years ago, from studying a colony of narcoleptic dogs at Stanford. His previous narcoleptic dog, a schipperke named Bear, was one of the last dogs left from the study. Briand describes him as “An absolutely darling very mellow older dog” who she still misses. His symptoms were similar to Watson’s, but Bear had a different personality and wasn’t as

dependent on them as Watson. “He had this way about him, sometimes when he would start having an attack and he’s looking at you, you’re looking at him and he’s kinda falling and you feel like he just loves you, it’s incredible. It melts your heart” (Briand). Bear lived with Mignot and Briand until he died a few months before Mignot got the call about Watson.

Watson spends his days running around Briand’s studio and Stanford. On a typical day, he can expect to accompany her everywhere, in a little dog carrier they call The Cadillac. He follows

her as usual, while she gets out of The Cadillac. She says to him in French, “On ne va,” and he hops in and they are off to the studio. In the studio he spends his time sleep in his little bed in the studio darkroom, or waiting for some chicken. At the studio he has become the mascot and third member of Create 3, the other two members being the artists that work in the studio, Briand and Paloma Lucas. The studio, also located in Palo Alto, is a part of an artist community. It was originally studio E3, which inspired Create 3. Watson usually hangs out in the studio

sleeping, and Lucas reports he is a welcome distraction, when they need to take a break. While they wait for their screens to dry, they go to Watson to play with him. Something about having him there helps them to relax and to create more inspired pieces. In fact, Watson has even been featured in Create 3's artwork. Simply having Watson around lightens atmosphere, which then helps them come up with new ideas and concepts for their artwork.

Watson is good at comforting people. Mignot sometimes brings him to the clinic, where he treats a lot of young children. "It's true that he makes them feel better because he is very cute and it's nice to see that

"From the moment I met him I knew there was something special about him"

there are other people and animals that have narcolepsy. It helps them understand that it's a real disease" (Mignot). Seeing Watson helps them understand their disease, and through a little dog it doesn't feel as scary or intimidating. Watson loves to play, he is easy to interact with, and kind of interaction brings that simple happiness to

everyone he meets. While he may not physically heal, he helps people feel as if they are not alone in their distress. Watson understands, and sometimes that's enough to make a difference. While Mignot has considered it, Watson doesn't receive any treatment for his narcolepsy. There are certainly options available, but they have decided that it simply isn't worth it. As Watson leaves puppyhood, he is learning how to cope and becoming more patient. Naps are an effective way to combat the daytime drowsiness, and since Watson is a dog it's no problem; he doesn't have to fit it into his schedule. Mignot estimates around 80% of people with narcolepsy go on to lead relatively normal lives with around 80% functionality, going to school and finding jobs. New strides in narcolepsy research like Mignot's make it easier to understand and treat the disease. Watson will continue to inspire, amuse, and sleep.



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Special Thanks to: Servane Briand, Emmanuel Mignot, Paloma Lucas, Beth Newhall, Freestyle, Academy, Daniel Darling, Estelle De Zan, and Watson

Artist Bio

Her name is Lara Darling. She lives in California with her parents, twin brother, and cats. She is bilingual, and a junior at Mountain View High School. When she isn't following around narcoleptic dogs she likes to read, sew and make art. When she goes to college she hopes to become a fashion designer.

