

Dental Malocclusion in *Oryctolagus Cuniculus*
Lesczyk Krempel

I hate watching my husband cry. "I'm awwwright," he sniffs, as I poke at his lip, which is already swelling.

"Honey, do you want me to get you some ice?" I've learned how to deal with Jon's injuries: excessive coddling.

"No. I will be fine, weawy. Oww! Not so hawd!"

I stuff an ice cube into a washcloth folded into a rabbit shape and decorated with googly eyes, and offer Jon his "boo-boo bunny." He holds it against his lip while I slide down from my chair to the floor, swearing when my tailbone thuds against the floor, and begin crawling around under the coffee table hunting the big bunny who caused the boo-boo.

We adopted Raspberry about three years ago from an overcrowded, understaffed shelter in Herkimer, NY. She had been there for more than a year and a half, while other rabbits were taken in and adopted out. I had been warned that the director of the shelter was very particular about who adopted their animals, you know, background checks and waiting periods, but she was thrilled that I was interested in Raspberry. A local man had been petitioning the shelter to have her "put to sleep", to free her from the pain and agony of her disability. Raspberry is a "special needs" rabbit; I'm a "special needs" human. Nobody else wanted Razyzy.

Raspberry has a malocclusion: her teeth don't line up. You probably think rabbits are rodents, but they haven't been classified that way since 1912, when the order Lagomorpha was established for rabbits, hares, and pikas. Both rodents and lagomorphs have open-rooted teeth, which will continue growing throughout their lives; the animals grind their teeth together, or against hard objects like sticks, to wear down the teeth, which have very soft enamel or enamel on only one side. Rodents, however, have a conveniently simple two pairs of incisors, while Raspberry and her lagomorph cousins have four pairs, two quite long upper incisors on the top and two shorter lower incisors on the bottom, with four "peg teeth," very short incisors, one each behind the main ones. Since Raspberry's top sets and bottom sets don't line up, they don't wear down enough and they grow far too long.

The laws of nature dictate Raspberry should die; her teeth should either grow down out of her mouth, into her cheek and lips, or up into her brain. Raspberry and I have very little respect for survival of the fittest, though. If her teeth aren't taken care of before they start to really annoy her, she will bash her face against the wall or jump from a high place face first, or hook her teeth around something fixed, like the cage bars, and yank her head back furiously until she pulls them out, and leaves them laying on the floor. She doesn't need to perform this primitive self-surgery often; Jon and I are becoming quite competent rabbit dentists.

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Malocclusions can be pretty mild; some rabbits only need treatment once a year. Raspberry, on the other hand, has the worst case of incisor malocclusion her vet has ever seen. Every once in a while Razy goes to the doctor for her dentistry, but mostly it's a do-it-ourselves matter. A malocclusion can't be cured, but we clip Razy's teeth very short at least once a month, to let her chew and eat fairly normally and without pain. People look wary when we say we need to clip our rabbit's teeth, but it's really not a big deal. The nerve stops before the teeth break the gum line, so it doesn't hurt a bit.

What does hurt is being kicked in the teeth by a twelve-pound Leporid. Leporids (rabbits and hares) have large, powerful hind legs, perfect for evading enemies, thumping out messages, and smashing predators, or rabbit dentists, in the face. Leporids also possess very long, sharp, curved claws. Jon has a series of puffy red scratches on his neck. You might not guess on first glance that rabbits are terribly fierce fighters.

I take a few, much milder, kicks and scratches before I finally have a good hold around Razy's middle, and slide her along the floor to Jon. She struggles, four paws splayed outward, but Raspberry's feet are totally covered in fur, without pads like cats and dogs, which gives me a slight advantage as I scoot across the slick hardwood floor. Her eyes are bugging out; she is in full freak-out mode.

Jon attempts to wrap her up in a towel to keep her paws in check, the classic "bunny burrito" trick that has served rabbit owners so well, but Razy is not interested in having her limbs bound and lets him know with a few bruising kicks to the sternum. Finally all paws are tucked in just so, and I pick up the clippers for my role in the operation. I suppose I'm the rabbit dentist, while Jon is just the hygienist. I remember when I got my first filling, the dental assistant held me down in a similar fashion, while the

dentist attempted to pry my jaws open.

I attempt to pry Raspberry's jaws open. She's even better at this than I was. She has a physiological advantage; she can't really kick us now, although she's trying, burying her mouth in her dewlap so I can't get near her teeth. The dewlap is a loose flap of skin, covered in fur, of course, which female rabbits can tuck their baby bunnies under to keep them cozy and warm. This is wrong- she's cheating.

I don't get mad because I've never been a real graceful patient myself. I was twelve when I got JRA. I was just a kid, so I hope that doctor has forgiven me for the minor bruising he sustained when I swung at him. He didn't tell me what it meant to "aspirate the joint"; he just came at me with the largest syringe I had ever seen, comically large, a Ren and Stimpy needle. "What are you going to do with that?" I croaked just before I started flailing.

The synovial fluid he drew from my right knee tested positive for rheumatoid factor, confirming my diagnosis: Juvenile Rheumatoid Arthritis. In the thirteen years since then I've learned to chill out around needles. In fact, I inject myself twice a week

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with Enbrel, a laboratory engineered biological response modifier which binds with the excess tumor necrosis factor (TNF) alpha in my joint to ease the swelling, all for only 1100 bucks a month. I still look to the side when the needle slips under my skin.

I don't attack medical practitioners anymore. The last time I saw a doctor, I only wailed a bit and screamed vulgarities while he injected my shoulder with cortisone, a shot in the front and a shot in the back. The doctor bit his lip as he wiped the trickle of blood from my bicep. "Are you all right?" "Yeah," I said. "I'm cool."

Raspberry is only four, so I forgive her. When I'm finally able to raise her chin and cram my fingers into her mouth, she starts drooling on me. That way my hand gets all slippery and she can try to push my fingers away with her tongue. Believe it or not, this often works. Rabbit tongues are pretty damn tough. It must come from eating bark and sticks and grass. Razy can't do me too much damage with her crooked front teeth, but she has 26 other teeth to grind my skin off with. At least her molars are straight; molar malocclusion requires that a vet grind the teeth down while the rabbit is sedated. I wouldn't mind if Raz was sedated right now.

The clippers I use are just five dollar Walmart dog grooming clippers. When Raspberry goes to the vet, she gets properly trimmed with a device which looks a lot like a Dremel disk saw. The vet once suggested I buy one of these, but I think I can do less damage with the dog groomer. I imagine us throwing Razy in her carrier and rushing to the animal hospital ER with her ear in a bucket of ice. As it is, I sweat like Rush Limbaugh at a NOW rally while I wait for the vet to return with my precious Razbunny, completely intact.

We didn't name Raspberry. She was Raspberry when we got her. Raz has more nicknames than any rabbit I know- mundane ones: Razy, Raz, Razzamatazz, Razbunny, Razamabunny, but also a few more telling names: Thumper, as she is the first to warn our other rabbits of potentially threatening situations such as a car driving by, the wind blowing or Jon brushing his teeth, Chowhound, because she often eats her entire half-day food allowance within three minutes of being served, then she eats all of her mate, Braveheart's, food before he has tasted it, and Binkybutt.

Razbunny lived in a small cage at the shelter for the first quarter of her life. There wasn't any room for hopping or playing. When we brought Razy home she walked, as well as a rabbit can walk and not hop, one foot in front of the other, like a skulking cat. We had known Raspberry for a year before she learned to run like a rabbit, hopping and jumping. And then she binkied. A binky is a silly rabbit dance; spring straight up in the air and flip around before falling back to earth. The best binkiers follow this up with a loud, lightning gallop around the house crashing into and knocking over as many things as possible, then back to the jumping. Razy is a shy binkier, just silly little floppy hops, then hunch down low and peer sidelong to be sure all is well. Some experts theorize that binkies are a survival technique that allows the rabbit to take in the surroundings very quickly. This expert has seen a field full of rabbits binkying like lunatics; I wonder if being the world's dinner can really get to you, and if binkying is a better survival technique than Xanax.

The clippers are hooked around Raspberry's upper incisors. This is the easy part.

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Clip. "Good girl!" Jon says. Bottom teeth: Clip. "Oh, what a good, good girl!"

"Almost done!" I say. "Lemme see those toofers." Yes, I do talk baby talk to my rabbits. Don't tell anybody.

Razzy is losing whatever patience she had for this procedure. She's spitting all over me. The scent of rabbit saliva is like a sweet breeze across a spring meadow after a light rain, smelled from the other side of a damp, decaying wooden barn door. But I manage to check the teeth. The incisors are short and cleanly cut, perfect for cutting grasses and carrots. The molars look great for grinding it all up, just like mine on a smaller scale. Maybe my teeth are turning rabbit-like from all the carrots and sprouts I eat.

I kiss Razzy between the ears. Raspberry is a Holland Lop; in the middle of her head, between her floppy ears, an incredibly soft tuft of caramel colored fur sticks up, alfalfa style. I kiss her here over and over while Jon tells her what a good bunny she is, smoothing her soft, brown fur. I place her on the floor. Jon prefers to put her back into her cage, because that's where she wants to go anyway, but I like to let her realize the ordeal is over and she is free again. After a moment's pause she races into her cage, up the ramp to the spacious second floor, presses into the furthest corner and glares at me. I suck.

I feel like dirt for two minutes while she glares, sometimes thumping to alert her cousins that I am not a benevolent being; in fact, I prey on gentle, trusting rabbits: enticing them for weeks with carrots and parsley and alfalfa pellets and timothy hay and clean litter and then one day BAM! I show my true colors; I am a sick human who finds joy in torturing rabbits and collecting pieces of their teeth!

This lasts exactly two minutes, I've timed it. Then Razzy shakes a lot, like a dog just come in from the rain, and she begins cleaning herself- trying to wash away the indignity. It would make a touching story if Braveheart, her mate, stood by to support her in her recovery, but he has taken the opportunity, when I opened the cage to let Raspberry in, to jump out for some binkyng and knocking things over.

Soon after comes begging. She pulls at the bars with her stronger, straighter teeth and paces in front of her food dish, which is full of food. I can't blame her; I always demanded stickers or toys or lollipops after medical procedures. I still do, actually. So I feed her blueberries or strawberries and compliment her on how neatly she eats without her teeth sticking out at odd angles. She begs for more, and I give it to her. The other rabbits get pissed and glare at me, so I give them treats, too. They beg for more, but I don't fall for it. I try to explain, "Razzy gets extra treats because she went to the dentist, you didn't go to the dentist!"

Razzy hops out of the cage and sniffs me. She marks me by rubbing the scent glands under her chin against my shoe. After all this, I'm still her human. I hunch over, kiss her, and she half-binkies away. I pull myself back up into my chair, and I retire with Jon to the bathroom, where the Band-Aids are kept. "That wasn't too bad," he says. "Want to get out the syringes and do your Enbrel now?"

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