What is a second opinion?
A second opinion is defined as a consultation or a deliberation between two or more physicians/veterinarians about the diagnosis or treatment in a particular case. For this article I am referring to the veterinarian originally attending the dog seeking an opinion from a specialist for diagnosis and/or treatment.

A specialist is defined as a physician who has advanced training and a high degree of knowledge, skill and competence in their specialized area of practice. After completing their advanced training they are certified by a specialty board as being qualified as a specialist.

Why ask for a second opinion?
The veterinarians we take our dogs to are, for the most part, General Practitioners who are defined as veterinarians who do not specialize in a particular field of medicine. They have a broad general knowledge and experience in several disciplines or areas. These veterinarians may take a special interest in an area of practice, and may attend conferences and read articles about their area of interest. However, without advanced training and board certification they are not classified as a specialist.

With the knowledge explosion in the field of medicine and veterinary care a general practitioner can't be expected to be an expert in all the illnesses and diseases that may affect our dogs. Based on these statements insist on a consultation with a specialist for complex health problems. Not just for PLE/PLN but for all complex health problems.

Develop good lines of communication with your vet. If you have a good vet express your appreciation of their abilities as a General Practitioner. Let them know you value this and be open in sharing the information you gather about your breed of dog.

Who are the specialists?
In the diagnosis and treatment of PLE/PLN in the Soft Coated Wheaten Terrier?
Dr. Meryl Littman and Dr. Shelly Vaden.

Other specialists?
There is a guide to a list of internists who specialize in multiple areas of internal medicine on the SCWTCA site. www.scwtca.org Click on Health, and then click on "ACVIM veterinary internist". This will take you to the American College of Veterinary Internal Medicine site. There you can click on "ACVIM Specialist near you."

Why are these veterinarians considered specialists?
They are board certified in their area of specialty. They have 4 years of vet school, 3 years of internship and residency training, and specialty board certification that verify their level of knowledge and expertise.

Specialized knowledge does not end with specialty training. Involvement in clinical practice, research and continuing education provides for the ongoing development of their expertise. They are actively researching the health problems within their specialty.

For example; health problems affecting our Wheatens; Dr. Meryl Littman and Dr. Shelly Vaden both see Wheatens in their clinical practice at their respective universities. They have also consulted with well over 500 veterinarians, giving their advice on the diagnosis and treatment of an ill Wheaten. This consultation is important, as there is no "cookbook recipe" for the investigations to be done or the treatment. Some
dogs have additional abnormalities or do not show all the signs and symptoms, therefore they need an individualized plan of care. Dr. Vaden is also doing long-term follow-ups on a colony of Wheatens and Weagles.

**Why can't my vet get the information from veterinary journals and textbooks?**
Veterinary information in reputable journals and textbooks can be old before it is published. Remember how long we waited for the article "Familial Protein-Losing Enteropathy and Protein-Losing Nephropathy in Soft Coated Wheaten Terriers: 222 Cases (1983-1997)" to be published in the Journal of Veterinary Internal Medicine? Research completed in 1997, then analysis of data and article written, article submitted March 1999, published in January 2000. It can take as long as 10 years for new knowledge to be published in a textbook. There are many, many different textbooks available. They are expensive and vets may not have the most current edition.

When your vet contacts a specialist to discuss your dog's case they get the current (cutting edge) information on both the best diagnostic tests to diagnose the problem and the most effective treatment plan for the diagnosis. Isn't this what you want for your dog? Why not contact the ones generating the information and knowledge?

Cost is sometimes a factor in the type of treatment a dog may receive. In this case specialists can also assist your vet. Why do expensive tests that may not give the answer we are looking for? They can guide your vet by suggesting what tests to do. Not doing the tests that will not add to information needed may save money.

**How can you be a part of getting a second opinion?**
Be an Advocate for your dog! What is an advocate? They are the person who pleads another's cause. You can be your dog's advocate by being knowledgeable about the Wheaten Health web sites, all the contact information on how your vet can access Dr. M. Littman and Dr. S. Vaden.

Be aware of your dog. Observe them when they are healthy so you will notice any differences that could signal a change in their health status early. Keep accurate records; write down dates so you can give a good history of your dog's health or illness.

Email has become one of the vet's best tools in the accessing of second opinions. Your vet can email the information they have regarding; history, signs and symptoms of the illness, testing that has been done etc., and arrange a time for a telephone conversation. This will save valuable time for both your vet and the specialist being consulted.

**Why is it sometimes hard to get your vet to ask for a second opinion?**
Ego! Watch out for it. It can get in the way of the good medical care your Wheaten needs and deserves. Not only your Wheaten but you as well, after all you are paying for this care. If your vet refuses to access a specialist for a second opinion - FIND ANOTHER VET!

A recent experience of mine is an example of this. One of my puppy owners called about her 5-year-old female whose blood work showed she was in renal failure. I asked the owner to have her vet call Dr. Littman. The vet did not want to (and did not) call Dr. Littman. His reason was that he would not have all the answers to the questions he knew she might ask (she was one of his professors in vet school). After a call to Wheaten owners I know in the area another vet was found. This vet made the call and did more testing. Was the final outcome a good one? No it was not, but at least we can take comfort in the fact that we did the best we could for her before she died of a probable diagnosis of PLN (results are still pending).

Ego is not exclusive to the vet, be sure yours doesn't also get in the way.

**Are we the dog owner also a problem?**
Owners who have some knowledge about the diseases (but not the training) hear their dog might be in kidney failure and assume too fast that it's a poor prognosis. Sadly some dogs are prematurely
euthanized and when the test results and necropsy data are analyzed the dog was misdiagnosed as having kidney failure or PLE/PLN. They had other diseases that could have been treated.

Early accurate diagnosis is the key to an acceptable outcome. If the outcome is not the one you hope and pray for at least you know you did the best that you could.

What causes misdiagnosis?
Test results may be changed by the presence of infections (e.g. parvovirus, Ehrlichia sp., Babesia sp., and Rocky Mountain spotted fever) parasite infestations (e.g. Heartworm and other parasites) liver disease, and urinary tract infections. These causes must be ruled out before definite diagnoses of PLE/PLN are made.

Was the blood tested at a laboratory that is reliable? For example; was it a lab with technologists who are trained to do the tests on equipment that is regularly tested for quality control? Or did personnel, who are not specifically trained to do the test, do the tests in the vet's office on equipment that does not have regular maintenance and quality control checks.

KEY POINT: SCWT + illness does not always = PLE or PLN!
Wheatens get other diseases beside PLE, PLN, RD, Addison's etc. Other breeds of dog die of PLE, PLN, RD and Addison's.

Remember the table in Dr. Littman's article? Here it is again (next page). Look at how several of the signs and symptoms are similar in different diseases. These similarities can lead to confusion and misdiagnosis of a sick dog.

Conclusion:
I am so fortunate to have a wonderful vet. She is confident in what she knows and is the first one to admit that she cannot begin to keep up with all the information out there. She stated that the Internet and email have been one of the best tools she has acquired. She can search for the specialists who are doing the research and developing the treatment protocols for the problem she has identified in the animal she is seeing. When we last spoke about this she mentioned how she is able to email what diagnostic information she has been able to gather to the specialist, the specialist is then able to review the information and either email her back or arrange a telephone call. It saves so much valuable time and money. Just think of it no telephone tag across North America. She mentioned a specialist at a university in Texas for a dog with cancer, an eye specialist at the University of Minnesota, and yes she has contacted Dr. Littman and Dr. Vaden about Wheatens in her practice. The possibilities are endless.