

“The Times They Are A Changin’”

I'm sure this old Bob Dylan song/saying applies to many things, but I know it also applies to how much we care for our pets and how we have come to recognize the importance of the human-animal bond. Pet therapy is used for human cancer patients, in children's hospitals, in nursing homes and in hospice situations just to name a few. Many of us have known for a long time that pets are good for our souls and greatly enrich our lives. Did you know, a recent survey conducted by the American Kennel Club found that almost half of us let our pets sleep on our beds and reported we spend three hours or more of quality time with our pets each day, further more the majority of us celebrate our pets' birthdays.



Nearly every large metropolitan area in the United States has one or more specialty centers. The largest cities such as New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, etc have as many as 10 specialty groups. The era of the veterinary specialist is definitely upon us and it's good news for the client who wants the absolute best treatment when their pet has a serious problem.

Virtually all of the specialties found in human medicine exist in veterinary medicine including surgery, internal medicine, anesthesiology, ophthalmology, dentistry, pain management, neu-

rology, cardiology.... and the list goes on and on. Veterinary specialists focus their attention on a narrow field of practice. This focused aspect of specialization gives a specialist a great advantage in the diagnosis and treatment of medical and surgical problems. For example, as a small animal orthopedic surgeon I can focus my attention on a knowledge base in one specific area. I read each issue of the Veterinary Surgical Journal and the orthopedic articles in the general veterinary journals. I attend orthopedic surgical seminars, orthopedic surgical continuing education classes and laboratories and often I'm asked to present orthopedic continuing education classes to general veterinarians.

Many aspects of pet health care can be taken care of by a family veterinarian. Again, general practices are offering services and a level of care not seen in years past. However, certain problems may require a specialist for the most sophisticated care. Usually, the family veterinarian suggests a referral for pets with serious problems and work as a team to provide the best care. In the past a negative stigma was associated with family veterinarians that referred cases to specialists or



universities; it was thought to imply a level of incompetence. However, in today's pet caring world, the American Animal Hospital Association equates frequency of referral to specialists with the most progressive and highest caliber of family veterinarians. Orthopedic surgery, endoscopy, cancer treatment, sophisticated dentistry, thoracic surgery, pain management, complicated abdominal surgery, heart disorders, eye problems, etc. are all situations that often require a board certified specialist.

When I was growing up, back before I got into veterinary school, I worked for a wonderful country veterinarian. He was the type of country veterinarian that would go out on a farm call and pick-up and vaccinate any barn cat he could get his hands on. He was another James Herriot, the colorful English veterinarian/writer who wrote among others, "All Creatures Great and Small". In the past, these terrific veterinarians did everything from bovine c-sections to canine broken bones. I bet they would be surprised and impressed with the level of care available these days. In fact, I bet they would be equally surprised and impressed with the number of pet owners who seek the highest level of care for their beloved 4-legged best friends.

The fact is, it's o.k. to love our pets the way we do.

The other changing paradigm is how many pet lovers demand the highest levels of pet health care. The pet owning public is more and more likely to seek the same sophisticated level of healthcare for their beloved pet as for themselves. In our practice, clients frequently see us for total hip replacements, ultrasonography, endoscopy, arthroscopy and cancer treatment.

Paralleling the pet owners' desires and needs for sophisticated medical care, are advances in veterinary training. In my 23 years as a veterinarian (14 in university teaching hospital settings), I've seen the professions' gradual transformation from producing country veterinarians all the way to specialization and board certification within specialty fields. These changes are in part, being driven by the information explosion. As with all areas of medicine (human or animal), infinite amounts of information are being generated. We have recognized that it is impossible to "keep up" with all the new information. Because of this, the veterinary curriculum has changed from one where all students took the same classes to a curriculum that allows students to focus on a certain area like Equine, Large Animal or Small Animal care. Consequently, the quality of general family practice is greater than ever.

Furthermore, in today's veterinary medicine, specialization beyond the normal 4 years of veterinary school, resulting in Board Certification in specific areas has become an integral aspect of pet health care. The scholastic pathway for veterinarians who specialize looks something like this: Undergraduate Pre-Vet College (2-4 years), Veterinary School (4 years; about 1 out of every 6 applicants is accepted), Internship in Small Animal, Equine or Large Animal medicine and surgery (1 year; about 1 out of 20 applicants is accepted), Residency in a specific discipline such as Small Animal Surgery or Small Animal Medicine (3 years; about 1 out of 40 applicants is accepted), and finally submission of credentials to sit for and pass a comprehensive multi-day examination.

The number of veterinary specialists is rapidly growing.



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