

# Style Plus

## State-of-the-Art Medical Care From Nose to Tail

### Veterinary Specialties Continue to Emerge

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A large dog named Elsie is breathing steadily under anesthesia on the operating table. The curly white fur surrounding her useless eye turns crimson as Seth Koch of the Animal Eye Clinic in Silver Spring meticulously scoops dead tissue out of the socket. The animal ophthalmologist lifts a solid silicone ball with tiny tongs and gently places it into the shell of the existing eye. Pop! The black prosthetic eyeball slides into the socket.

"Beautiful, let's close," says Koch.

As the staff tends to Elsie, patients and concerned owners gather in the homey waiting room filled with whimsical animal-oriented art. Framed letters of appreciation from the National Zoo, like one signed by the District's late, great panda Hsing-Hsing, whom Koch operated on, hang in his office. This is not an ordinary vet clinic but one that specializes in acute and chronic eye problems.

It's the start of a hectic day and Koch, who has been practicing his specialty on the East Coast since 1969, next examines a cheery corgi named Khi. He diagnoses an ulcerated cornea. After numbing the dog's eye, Koch scrapes off the top layer of dead tissue, then does a tick-tack-toe grid with a needle to get down to a healthy skin layer.

Dewey Muller lumbers into the clinic with his 8-year-old beagle, Ginnie Mae. The retired Bethlehem Steel worker from Harford County, Md., is worried about his dog's cloudy eye. It looks bad.

"It's glaucoma, like cancer to the eye," Koch tells the man. "Never a cure, only remission."

Muller asks how much the needed surgery will set him back.

"Go easy on me, doc," he says.

Total fees with anesthesia, meds and follow-ups will run between \$600 and \$1,000. Muller doesn't hesitate to schedule the surgery.

"Before my wife died, she asked me to take care of the pets. Besides, I love Ginnie

Mae," he says.

Meanwhile, Elsie is waking up from the anesthesia. Her owner, Jan Stovall of Takoma Park, explains that glaucoma in her dog's eye had ruptured the optic nerve. The prosthetic seemed easier for all to live with, instead of just a closure where her eye had been.

A plastic cone fastened around her head to prevent scratching, Elsie makes an unsteady dash to the door, freedom and hopefully a painless recovery.

Like the animal ophthalmologist, specialists in all aspects of animal health care are breaking off from general veterinary practice. Among the newer specialty groups are anesthesiology, oncology, neurology, pharmacology and nutrition. And if your pet has "issues," an animal behaviorist can deal with behavior modification. There are now 20 specialties recognized by the American Veterinary Medical Association, with clinics popping up across the country to handle the demand for quality, advanced care.

"People are aware of high-tech medical possibilities available for a healthier, longer pet life. As of 2001, there are 6,564 veterinarians practicing specialties in America," said AVMA spokeswoman Sharon Granskog, though she had no specific figures for the Washington area.

The Iams pet company has jumped on the specialty bandwagon, opening the first magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) clinic for dogs and cats in the country in Vienna.

The Iams Pet Imaging Center was launched, said company spokesman Brian Brown, because "pets deserve better health." The MRI, he said, "is very useful in detecting forms of cancer." Having an MRI, "alleviates the need for exploratory surgery by diagnosing unknown health problems."

Across the street from Iams, among the dozens of low-slung brown offices situated at the intersection of Route 123 and Maple Avenue in Vienna, is the Animal Dental



PHOTOS BY JUANA ARIAS—THE WASHINGTON POST

Animal ophthalmologist Seth Koch of the Animal Eye Clinic in Silver Spring examines Elsie while owner Jan Stovall looks on. Glaucoma in the dog's eye had ruptured the optic nerve, and a prosthetic was chosen instead of a closure where her eye had been. Below, Elsie after surgery.

Clinic.

Charles Williams is a veterinary dentist. Along with ophthalmology, dentistry was a pioneer specialty.

The clinic is more than routine dental care for your animal. Jay Spiegel's miniature dachshund puppy, Junior, was born with a cleft palate. The roof of his little mouth has a wide split down the center. Spiegel, a patent attorney from Mount Vernon, was set on saving this puppy's life.

"It's lucky that I work out of my home, since I had to tube-feed him milk replacement formula for five weeks, eight times a day."

Animals who have a deformity of this magnitude will choke on their food and die. This fortunate puppy sits unfazed, chewing the towel on the checkup table as Williams patiently explains how he will repair the damage. The fragile skin around the large hole must be tenderly sutured. The vet simulates the operation with a plastic skull and Spiegel turns the pup over to the vet. Junior is carried into the operating room to undergo the beginning stages of reconstruction.

Meanwhile, an unwilling Winnie is dragged in by Tricia Steadman of Silver Spring, who took the day off from the Discovery Channel to bring her mixed Lab to the clinic.

"I had no idea there was a doggy dentist—who knew?" she says.

Williams bends to have a look, his tie of smiling dogs hanging down.

"Oh, that's a bad one," he says.

It's a cracked tooth beneath the gumline. Steadman chooses the best treatment for immediate relief, and a now-very unwilling Winnie is hauled into the back room for an extraction.

The dentist asks her not to feed Winnie cow hoofs.

"I hate cow's hoofs—killer on teeth," he says.

To reaffirm his dislike, he points to a laminated hoof stuck on wood like a deer trophy.

A woman from Waynesboro, Pa., waits to see Williams for the second time to find relief for her cat, Oreo, who suffers from an intolerance to plaque. A shot of steroids will give the sick feline a break from the con-



stant pain of inflamed gums. Oreo's owner doesn't know if there are any animal dentists in her area. She trusts this one.

A pug named Ethelred wanders around sniffing chair legs. He is owned by Anders Warga of Vienna and is in for a cleaning, which for a pug is not so simple. Pugs need special care because their flat facial structure makes them susceptible to respiratory problems.

"Our dog, like so many pugs, has a significantly collapsed trachea, and that's why we shell out the big bucks for his care," says Warga. Today Ethelred's tooth cleaning cost \$300, double the price of what a primary vet would charge.

Only 45 minutes later a relaxed Junior, the dachshund with the cleft palate, is delivered to his owner. Dentist Williams and owner Spiegel review the before-and-after digital photos, which are amazing. The hole is sewn closed.

Winnie soon wobbles out of surgery minus one tooth and still feeling the effects of surgery.

"Like a night at the bar," her owner laughs.

The day is winding down. One more patient. A stray cat. Williams must get his rest

tonight. Tomorrow morning he must be at the National Zoo to fix the new baby tiger's broken tooth.

Next door to the dental clinic is Chesapeake Veterinary Cardiology Associates. The group shares space with a vet hospital that focuses on emergency and critical care. This is a perfect pairing, since CVCA's patients often need round-the-clock care.

Past the waiting room, past worried pet owners, sits a state-of-the-art ultrasound machine. There lies Elsa, a 16-year-old Maine coon cat. As gel is rubbed into the fur above her heart, she lets out an unearthly growl.

"Her heart looks clean. She has aging changes that should not surprise us," Bonnie Lefbom, a veterinary cardiac specialist, tells the owner. The certification for a specialist varies. Lefbom studied cardiology for four years beyond her DVM degree.

She points out that it is not the age of the animal that should dictate surgery, but its physical condition. Elsa's owner hopes to prevent her heart murmur from getting worse. It's good news for this cat.

Not so good for Poco, a 9-year-old Chesapeake Bay retriever from Alexandria, who has a cardiomyopathy, disease of the heart muscle.

"Saturday she was fine, up chasing rocks, and by the evening she was having breathing problems," said owner Michele Thorell.

Emergency veterinarians saved her life over the weekend by draining fluid from her lungs.

In the darkened room, Poco lies quietly on her side next to the ultrasound machine, while Lefbom points out the leaking valve. The gentle dog's eyes are bloodshot from recent laser surgery to relieve glaucoma, brought about by her diabetes—Poco is many animal specialists' patient. She is prescribed drugs to strengthen her heart muscles.

"Watch her diet, no pizza," says the veterinarian. "We can't reverse the damage but we can try to keep it from getting worse."

"She deserves to have the best," says Thorell as she hands over her Visa card. Comfort comes at a cost at these special clinics, but few balk when it comes to treating a sick member of the family.



Elsie greets Seth Koch. Veterinary specialties include oncology, pharmacology and nutrition.