

Veterinary Family Practice Reflects Human-Animal Bond

Pets in more than half of America's households are considered members of the family, according to the American Animal Hospital Association.

The close relationship between companion animals and humans has led not only to an increase in sophisticated veterinary care provided by specialists, but also to awareness that the general veterinary practitioner is a key component in the human-animal relationship. Advice and services provided by the family veterinarian affect every family member—human as well as animal.

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In recognition of the importance of animals in our lives, UC Davis is building a new program, Veterinary Family Practice, that strengthens the concept of the vital role general practitioners play in supporting the human-animal bond.

Under the leadership of Dr. Rick Timmins, Veterinary Family Practice reflects a philosophy and responsibility that applies to more than providing essential services to the animal itself—it also promotes the role of the veterinary general practitioner in the health and welfare of the family as a whole.

Dr. Timmins says, "Veterinary practitioners now have the option of referring cases to a growing number of private specialty practices (for example, California now has 121 veterinary specialists in internal medicine, 33 in ophthalmology, and 113 in surgery). The explosion of client requests for referrals to specialists to pursue sophisticated diagnostics and therapies has created a need for a new 'specialist'—the veterinary family practitioner."

"Family practice is not really a new paradigm in veterinary medicine—concern for the human-animal bond has driven veterinarians for years," says Dr. Timmins. "The primary focus on the well-being of the pet is still the

same, but both the relationship and professional technology have changed dramatically, requiring new mandates on how to interact with clients and patients most effectively."

The veterinary family practitioner's role begins with selection of an appropriate pet—an important issue in the question of how to prevent relinquishment of animals. In addition to traditional medical and surgical skills, that role requires special expertise in life stage management, behavior consulting, nutrition, immunization, parasite control, familiarity with special issues such as complementary medicine (homeopathy, acupuncture, nutraceuticals, chiropractic, etc.), referrals, support networks, special needs communication, and pet overpopulation and control.

The current UC Davis DVM curriculum already includes practical instruction in many family practice issues. As the new program develops, the range of instructional opportunities in veterinary family practice will be expanded.

Pet Loss Support Hotline coordinator Bonnie Mader, MS, and Shelter Medicine Program director Kate Hurley, DVM, are developing workshops in veterinary family practice that will be conducted for veterinary students next fall.

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Together, the California Veterinary Medical Association and UC Davis are creating a task force to identify the skills and knowledge required to become an effective veterinary family practitioner, in order to create a certification program in Veterinary Family Practice for veterinarians and their hospitals.

Dr. Timmins says, "It is important to get input from the profession, not just in the initial stage, but also on a continuing basis as the program evolves. I hope eventually to see Veterinary Family Practice become a board-certified specialty."



Richard Timmins (DVM, UC Davis, '77), director of the Center for Animals in Society, leads the school's new program in veterinary family practice.

Dr. Timmins, pictured with his dog, Riley, founded the Companion Animal Clinic of Springfield, Oregon, in 1979 and lectured frequently on practice management

and avian medicine and surgery at the College of Veterinary Medicine, Oregon State University.

Dr. Timmins was also a founder of a pet loss support group called Society for Animal Mourning. He and his wife, Marcia Merryman, DVM, owned and managed The Cat and Bird Clinic in Eugene, Oregon, before coming to Davis in 2003.

A Veterinary Family Practitioner Needs Widening Range of Skills

To meet the needs of the contemporary companion animal and its family, a primary care family practice veterinarian needs a widening range of new and different skills in the following areas:

- Optimizing relationships with clients, referral veterinarians and support groups
- Communicating with adults, children, and elderly clients; delivering bad news; managing emotions
- Providing elements of a supportive environment for the client—accommodating the client's emotional, psychological, spiritual and physical needs
- Referring appropriate cases, and managing referred cases as an advocate for the patient and interpreter for the client
- Engaging in team leadership—the patient management team may also include veterinary staff, referral practices, emergency clinics, animal advocates, community workers and caregivers
- Dealing with animal-human issues during disasters and evacuations
- Caring for working and athletic animals
- Handling geriatrics, end-of-life issues and hospice care
- Recognizing and reporting zoonoses (diseases transmissible between animals and humans)