DOGGY DONORS

It’s just after 9 a.m. and the first donor is walking into one of the country’s more unusual blood banks. Staff members fondly call out his name as he bounds into the room. Wagging his tail.

Welcome to the UC Davis animal blood center, an adjunct of the school’s Veterinary Medical Teaching Hospital, and a place where blood is collected daily—mostly from dogs, like Bourbon, the 3-year-old golden retriever who this day is the first of several pooches set to make donations. But the center also draws blood from cats, cows, horses, llamas, sheep, pigs. “Even chickens and ferrets,” says Dr. Sean Owens, the veterinary clinical pathologist who opened the facility eight years ago as a way to provide blood for potentially lifesaving transfusions at the renowned vet hospital.

Owens, a lanky 48-year-old, started the center as a “closed colony” that relied on dogs and other animals kept on-site. But in a move that sets the operation apart from almost all others in the state, he shifted to a system that, for dogs at least, uses household pets brought in by their owners.

That saves the costs that would be used to care for the animals on-site. “It also ties the community to the university,” Owens says of his model. “Everybody likes blood donation programs.”

“Everybody” includes the 70 or so dogs that are regular donors, insists Owens and his assistant, lab manager Julie Burges.

“All they know is that they are petted, loved on and given treats,” Owens says. Adds Burges: “They come in wagging their tails and leave the same way” following a 10-minute procedure that has one medical staffer drawing about a half liter of blood from the jugular vein while another staffer holds the animal, petting it and cooing to it all the while.

It seems to be a painless procedure for Bourbon, the golden brought in this day by his owner, Carissa Smith, who works at the hospital. “I ask him if he wants to go to work with me and he’s up, wagging his tail,” Smith says of donation days. She volunteers Bourbon for the program, she says, because she can imagine being the owner of a dog desperately needing a transfusion. “If he were to be hit by a car, I’d want that (blood) to be available.”

Getting hit by cars is indeed one of the chief reasons dogs end up needing blood at UC Davis. Fights with other dogs also are a major cause of blood loss, so is the inadvertent eating of poisons left out for rodents.

Dogs that are volunteered for the donation program come in for an initial screening to “type” their blood and make sure it is free of infectious diseases. After that, the donors make regular visits at which their blood is drawn, broken down to components—red blood cells, plasma and platelets—and stored until needed.

The all-time biggest contributor: a Rottweiler named Superstar who came in 51 times, donating about 6 gallons of blood, before reaching the program’s retirement age of 8. Dogs like Superstar and their owners are real heroes, Owens says. “Arguably they’ve saved as many lives as our top-notch surgeons,” he says.

Donors must be at least 1 year old and weigh a minimum of 55 pounds. Dogs accepted for the program get free heartworm pills, flea and tick medication and regular blood screenings—services worth about $500 to $600 annually, says Owens.

Alas, household cats aren’t accepted as donors. Many harbor an undetectable heart disease that causes death when they are bled for donation purposes, Owens says. As a result, the hospital keeps its own colony of cats that can safely give blood. “They are spoiled rotten,” he says.

To volunteer a dog for the program, call the blood bank at (530) 752-1393. —Bob Sherritt