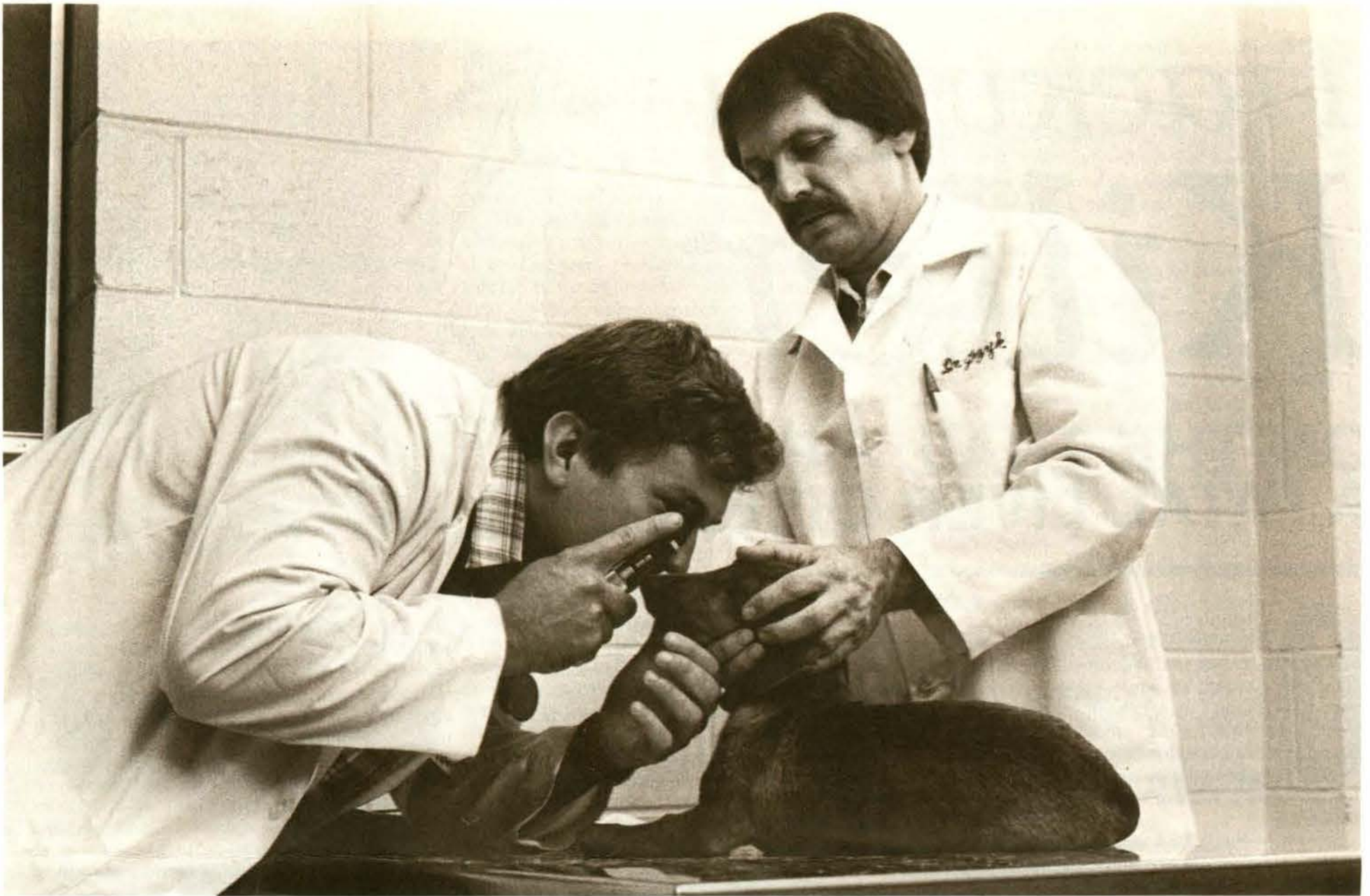


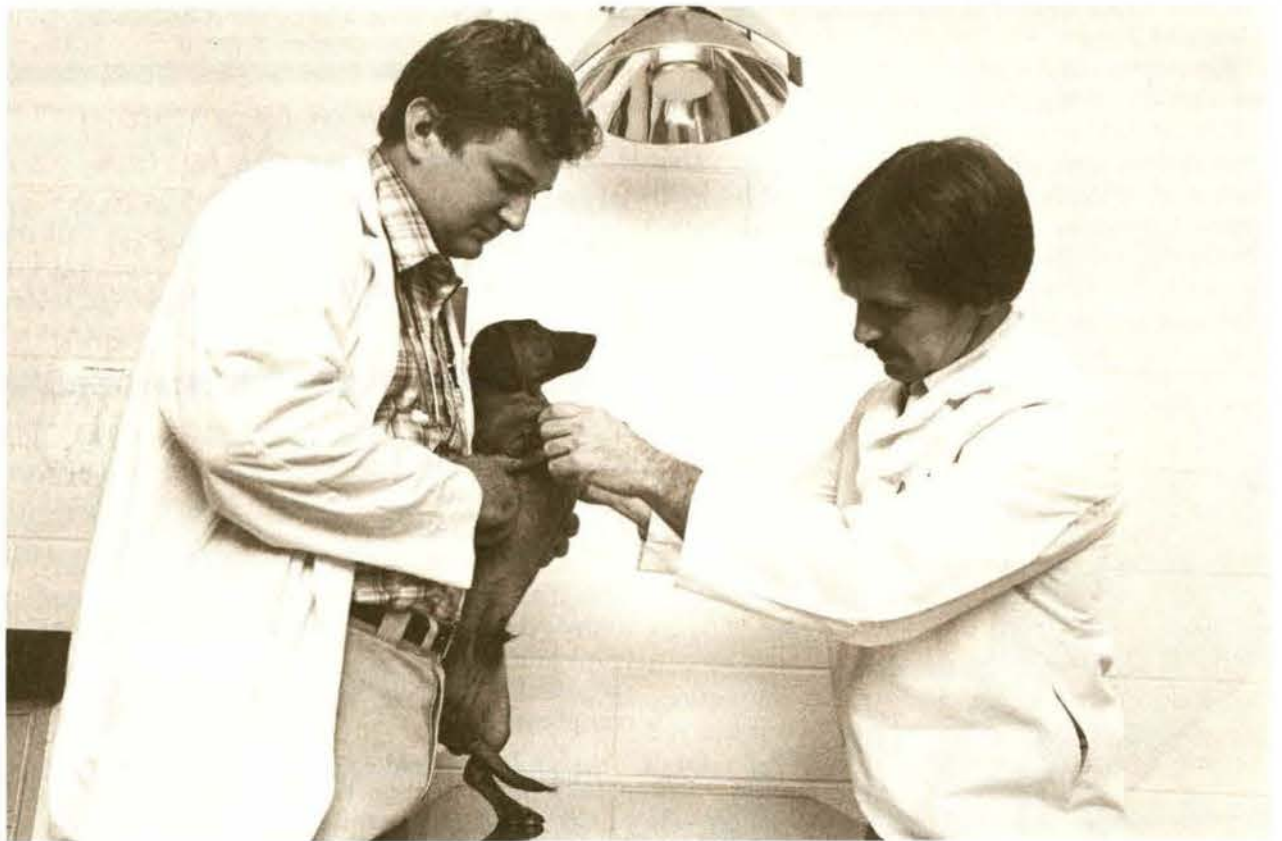


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## Pediatricians for Animals: That Important First Visit



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## **PEDIATRICIANS FOR ANIMALS**

# THAT IMPORTANT FIRST VISIT

**A** puppy's or kitten's first visit to the veterinarian may be the most important one of its life," explained Dr. Peter F. Jezyk. "Here a relationship between the owner and the veterinarian is established and a care and health routine is developed for the rest of the animal's life. It is a very special visit."

This concept is stressed to the fourth-year students who work in the Pediatrics Clinic. The Clinic, part of the genetics and reproductive clinic established by the Section of Medical Genetics at the School of Veterinary Medicine, University of Pennsylvania, developed gradually over the past six years. "Originally we began it as part of our metabolic disease screening program," said Dr. Jezyk, associate professor of medicine (medical genetics). "It grew and developed into the only clinic of its kind at a veterinary school."

Pediatrics is an important aspect of veterinary medicine. "About one quarter of the cases in a practice involve young animals," he said. "Pediatric patients are those animals which haven't finished growing, up to about one year of age."

Puppies and kittens differ from mature cats and dogs. "At this hospital, where sixty percent of the cases are referral cases, students are accustomed to seeing rare conditions rather than healthy animals," he said. "In the Pediatrics Clinic we teach them that certain signs, such as larger lymph nodes, are normal for young animals. Students learn that puppies and kittens have different laboratory values than adult animals and that they, like children, are subject to childhood diseases which are not seen in mature cats or dogs." Students learn how to handle and examine the young animals and to explain to owners the importance of vaccination schedules and worming routines. "Distemper is sixty percent fatal and even if an animal survives, it is often damaged," Dr. Jezyk said. "This disease, as well as others, can be prevented through vaccination. Regular vaccinations of cats and dogs are preventive medicine and are less expensive in the long run than caring for an animal with one of the viral diseases." He explained that diseases such as distemper, parvovirus disease and others cannot be eradicated because they occur in the wildlife population. Prevention is also stressed in the case of heartworm disease. "We feel it is very important to educate the owner and to discuss the future health care an animal will need," he explained. "An educated owner is a better owner; he will be able to spot a problem sooner and this may enable the veterinarian to prevent an illness from becoming a major one."

Dr. Jezyk discussed the importance of vaccination schedules. "The intervals depend on the

situation the animal is in. If it is a single pet, inoculations are given at different intervals than if the animal is part of a large breeding establishment, where immunizations must be given much more frequently." He also pointed out the value of detailed records, particularly for young animals. "When the veterinarian has information about the growth rate and the weight gain of a young animal, it is often much easier to make a diagnosis. This is particularly important in the case of very young animals."

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The patients coming to the clinic are usually six weeks or older. "Economically, it is often not feasible to treat a one- or two-week-old puppy or kitten," he said. "Also, the mortality rate in an average purebred litter is about twenty percent. This is due not so much to disease but to inborn defects."

The puppies and kittens seen at the clinic range from animals brought in for vaccinations and a check-up to animals with severe disorders, referred by practitioners. In the latter cases the clinic often draws upon the other specialties at VHUP in an effort to help the patient.

Dr. Jezyk pointed out the importance of check-ups at a later age. "People wouldn't dream of not taking their children to the pediatrician annually," he said. "Yet they assume that a young puppy or kitten, after having received the last permanent vaccination at twelve to sixteen weeks of age, doesn't need to see the veterinarian again until it is time for booster shots a year later." Much can happen during this time. He explained that many disorders do not manifest themselves until an animal is over six months of age. "We used to see the young animals at about that age for the rabies inoculation," he said. "We then could give it a physical exam and detect any abnormalities. Now, with an increase in rabies in the wildlife population, this vaccination is given earlier and many people won't bring a puppy or kitten back at six or seven months of age just for a check-up."

Another aspect of pediatrics is nutrition. "We have seen some rather bizarre diets recommended for puppies and kittens by well-meaning breed-

ers," Dr. Jezyk said. "Some involve three or four different foods given at various times of the day. Often these are expensive, complicated to prepare, and of little value to the growing animal." He recommends to owners that puppies and kittens are fed a good commercial feed, tailored to the need of growing puppies and kittens. He also is not in favor of supplementing the daily ration with vitamins and calcium. "We don't often see problems due to the lack of calcium or vitamins," he said. "Rather, we frequently see animals with problems due to oversupplementation of these substances."

The Pediatrics Clinic at the School is an important resource. It provides practitioners with a clinic for referrals of difficult and unusual problems in young animals. It is also a place where students learn to treat a healthy young cat or dog, a population which will be a major part of their practice. The clinic is, as Dr. Jezyk put it, a clinic for "small animal herd health," an aspect of veterinary medicine very important to the well being of the puppies and kittens which become part of countless families each year.

The Pediatrics Clinic sees patients Mondays and Tuesdays, appointments can be made by calling (215) 898-4680.

