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On the Road, Veterinary Medicine Comes to the Client

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Dr. Sharon A. Dailey examines Katie Kat in the mobile veterinary hospital.

House calls have long been standard practice in large animal veterinary medicine, yet house calls for small animal patients are still not too common. But that is changing as equipment now is more compact, to the point that a complete veterinary hospital can be fitted into a customized van.

Two Penn alumni, Keith Grove (V'82) and Sharon Dailey (V'79), are among the growing number of recent graduates from the nation's veterinary schools who have opted for a mobile veterinary hospital. Each has a mobile clinic, though the practice and clients are different.

Dr. Dailey operates her mobile clinic in southern New Jersey, with a practice limited to small animals. Dr. Grove's mobile practice is in Vero Beach, FL, and he not only sees small and large animals but also has a practice specializing in veterinary dentistry.

Both Sharon Dailey and Keith Grove came to veterinary medicine from other health professions. Dr. Dailey worked as a registered nurse prior to returning to school, and Dr. Grove had received a degree in dentistry from the University of Detroit and had specialized in periodontics at the University of Michigan prior to coming to Penn to study veterinary medicine.

After graduation, Dr. Dailey worked as an associate in a small animal practice in southern New Jersey. She bought the mobile veterinary hospital unit in 1984 after analyzing the veterinary needs in the area around Voorhees. "I perceived that there was a need for a house call practice," she said. "There are many senior citizens and handicapped people with pets who have great difficulty transporting their pets to a clinic." Dr. Dailey pointed out that, prior to opening her practice, she consulted with veterinarians in the area and explained her plans were to provide care for pets owned by those who, for a number of reasons, could not use clinics. Her practice is well received and she often gets referral cases from area practitioners.

"Frequently I take care of difficult patients," she said, "animals which are too hard to handle or to transport, animals which get too nervous or animals which are too ill to transport." She explained that many of her clients are elderly with no means of transportation. "The mobile clinic is the only way in which the pets can receive even routine care, such as an examination and vaccinations."

Dr. Dailey's observations are borne out by Claire Tabor, a spokesman for Dodgen Industries, a manufacturer of mobile veterinary clinics. "These clinics are the fastest growing segment of veterinary medicine," Mr. Tabor said. "It is a service which is needed by the more than 50% of companion animals which do not receive routine veterinary care." According to Tabor, there are at least seven or eight mobile practices in every state, and some states, such as California and New York, have an even higher number.

Most of these practices, according to Dailey and Tabor, do not interfere with the traditional small animal practice. "They provide a service for another segment of the market," said Tabor. "They bring veterinary care to the door of those who have difficulty transporting their animals to a clinic."

In addition to the elderly and handicapped, this group includes the multiple pet owners for whom, according to Dr. Dailey, a visit to the veterinarian with all their pets is a great inconvenience, undertaken only in emergencies. Another group of Dr. Dailey's clients are owners with animals which are fatally ill. "Many prefer euthanasia in familiar surroundings," she said. "The animal and the owner are at greater peace making the death of the pet more acceptable."

Dr. Dailey's patients schedule their appointments, just as they would at a clinic, and each

day the veterinarian makes her rounds, traveling from home to home in her specially equipped van. "It has all the facilities of a regular animal hospital—laboratory space, refrigeration, air conditioning, surgery and anesthesia facilities and cages to house the patients," she said. "I do not have an X-ray machine; patients needing radiographs are referred to a clinic. I also refer surgery cases on the larger breed dogs due to space limitations."

Dr. Dailey enjoys her mobile practice. "In some ways it is an advantage," she said. "The patient can be observed in his environment; I can see the food he is fed, look at the shelter which is provided and assess the overall pet/client interaction. Also, owners and pets tend to be more relaxed than in an office setting."

One of Dr. Dailey's reasons for establishing a mobile practice was financial. "When I graduated from veterinary school, I had a large loan debt," she said. "To open a clinic would have meant an even greater debt or possible relocation. I wanted to stay here in Voorhees township and practice. The mobile unit allowed me some flexibility and a manageable indebtedness."

Dr. Grove's mobile hospital is similar to Dr. Dailey's, but he has a radiology unit as well as special dental equipment such as high speed drills, suction, forced air and water and other specialized equipment. Like Dr. Dailey, Dr. Grove makes house calls by appointment where he sees not only companion animals but also large animals. There is a further difference between the two. Dr. Grove still practices periodontics in an office in Vero Beach. His days are divided between his two professions. Do his patients mind? "No," he said. "They think it is rather novel. Often my dental patients ask questions about animals and seek advice."

Grove also uses his mobile veterinary hospital as a specialty clinic for veterinary dentistry. Recently he equipped a police dog with two new metal fangs so the animal could continue its service as a K-9 dog. The dog had broken its two upper canine teeth.

Veterinary dentistry is also the subject of a special course Dr. Grove teaches to area practitioners. "I use the vehicle as a classroom where other practitioners can learn procedures and have hands-on experience in veterinary dentistry. This has been well received."

While Dr. Grove plans to open an office soon, he will not give up his mobile veterinary hospital. "I will continue to make house calls," he said. "There is a need for that aspect of veterinary medicine."

For both Dr. Grove and Dr. Dailey, the mobile unit provided the means to establish a practice without incurring the large debt associated with a clinic.

"Mobile veterinary practices are here to stay," said Mr. Tabor. "They are needed to reach a new segment of the veterinary health care market, and they provide a service in animal care. Also, they enable the recent graduate to become independent much sooner." *H. W.*