



4-1-2002

## On Being Vava'u's Veterinarian

Wendy McIlroy  
*University of Pennsylvania*

# On Being Vava'u's Veterinarian

By Wendy McIlroy, V'86

**W**hen I sold my equine practice in Ashland, Ohio, I really didn't expect to work as a veterinarian again. I'd moved on to my next (ad)venture – as a Professional Association of Diving Instructors-certified scuba diving instructor with Beluga Diving in the South Pacific, on the archipelago of Vava'u, Kingdom of Tonga.

I spend most days in or on the water either teaching diving or guiding certified divers, introducing them to the remarkable creatures that inhabit our underwater world. It is a serene, beautiful environment, and I enjoy sharing it with others. In the winter (July-November), we play host to South Pacific humpback whales, which calve and breed in our quiet waters. The Kingdom of Tonga is one of the few places in the world where it is permitted to snorkel with the whales, and people come from all over the world for this incredible experience. Although we rarely come face-to-face with whales when scuba diving (they don't like the bubbles), being serenaded by whale song adds a special dimension to our dives.

But once a vet always a vet. My very first case was a baby booby with a broken and infected wing. OK, hmm, what can I do with that? Well, I have some iodine solution in my travel kit. And these wooden spoons might work for splints. Anyway, six-weeks later, the booby, named Pepper, was terrorizing my neighbor's dogs, eating them out of house and home, and learning to fly. I was one for one!

After numerous requests for veterinary services, I realized I could not remain a simple diving instructor. You see, there is only one official veterinarian in the Kingdom of Tonga. He is located in Tongatapu, the southern island group, and he works for the government. I live in Vava'u, the northern island group, 180 air

miles away. So I set up meetings with the Governor of Vava'u, the Minister of Agriculture, the Minister of Health, and, of course, Sio, the veterinarian. Each time I dressed in a long dark skirt, modest blouse, and a ta'ovala, the mat-like thing Tongans wear around their waists as a sign of respect.

They asked for copies of my veterinary licenses and diploma, which I gave them, and they said "OK". That was



Aerial View of the Vava'u Island group, Kingdom of Tonga.



Pepper with a freshly bandaged wing.

a year.

So I decided to keep it unofficial, charging no fees. I brought a few surgical instruments, my stethoscope, ophthalmoscope, sterile gloves, drapes, and some assorted pharmaceuticals, and set up shop. I gradually learned the complications involved. First, how to sterilize instruments? Even the local hospital doesn't have an autoclave, or an X-ray machine, or much of anything else—truthfully, the only way you'd get me in there is unconscious. So I boil the instruments. Not ideal, but you learn to make do. And by the way, expensive German stainless steel instruments do rust.

Second, how do you do things without all

the "toys" we are so used to in the United States? This is not the veterinary medicine I'd practiced at home. My diagnostic ability now depends entirely on my senses—no lab tests, radiographs, ultrasounds. It's really back to basics. It can be extremely frustrating. But in a way, it's that much more rewarding. Like when you spay a dog on the back of an overturned dingy, elbowing away the four other dogs sniffing around and checking out what you're doing, and the owner (the local doctor, no less) "forgets" your instructions and lets her outside that night and she takes off for three days—

and she still doesn't dehisce, or bleed out, or die, or any of the other terrible things you'd imagined. Well, it makes you feel pretty good, and pretty amazed at the resilience of these tough island animals.

Since I am not officially "in business", my payment for services rendered comes in the form of gifts. Hand-painted t-shirts, dinners, bunches of bananas—a "bunch" in this case being



Beluga Diving staff. Dr. McIlroy is third from left.

it. Except for the fact that the business license required to open a practice would cost far more than I expected to make in

the ENTIRE bunch, taller than I am. Having all of your bananas ripen at the same time is like having zucchini in your garden. You make anything banana-related you can think of. You give some to your friends. The local pigs get the rest. Did I mention the pigs? In Vava'u, they wander the streets. They're more common than dogs, and can really do a job rooting up your yard. Most people have fences around their property to keep the pigs out.

Living in a tropical paradise has its charm. And right now I wouldn't trade it for anything. Will I be here forever? Probably not. Will I go back to "standard" veterinary practice? I have no idea, but if I do, it will be with a renewed sense of what's important, and with a new respect for the body's resilience.

*Dr. McIlroy may be reached via e-mail at <doctorwen@yahoo.com>.*

*For more information on Beluga Diving, visit <www.belugadivingvavau.com>.*