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Mobile Clinic With Daughter in Driver's Seat

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by Joan Capuzzi Giresi, C'86 V'98

It's a classic case of daughter knows best: She owns the small-animal practice and her veterinary sidekick, "Dad," defers to her on the key medical and business decisions. Truly, everyone is happy.

Each week, **Barbara J. Flickinger, C'81 V'85**, farms out a handful of cases that come into her busy housecall practice to her father, **George L. Flickinger, Jr., V'58 GR '64**. Barbara gives George daily reminders for his "to do" lists, advises him on how to handle certain pets and owners, and brings him up-to-speed on the latest treatments and vaccine protocols.

"She guides me and confirms things that I'm not absolutely certain about," says George.

Though George has a 27-year head start over Barbara as a veterinarian, he is a novice by comparison. Rather than entering practice after veterinary school, George, 68, earned his Ph.D. in pathology and joined the faculty at Penn's School of Medicine, where he held a research and teaching position in reproductive biology through the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology. He did not practice veterinary medicine until 1980, when he started a small housecall service for homebound pet owners in eastern Montgomery County, Pa., at the request of a woman who trained dogs for the disabled.

Meanwhile, Barbara earned her veterinary degree and spent a few disillusioned years working in small-animal general and emergency practices. When George left Penn in 1991 to establish a human in vitro fertilization program for the Presbyterian Hospital System of Dallas, he asked Barbara to take over his budding housecall practice, which, by that time consisted of 75-or-so clients.

Such were the humble beginnings for Housecall Veterinarian, based in Spring City, Pa. The practice flourished over the next five years, and when George returned to Pennsylvania in the mid-1990s, Barbara implored his help. She even sent books to him in Texas so he could refresh his veterinary knowledge. "She expected me to read them entirely," George recalls with a chuckle.

To relieve some of his daughter's work burden, George agreed to join the practice, but with one caveat.



Jon Adams/nhphotos

"I told her I would work within my limitations. I wouldn't do surgery. But I would do the mundane things, like deworming and ear problems," he says.

George accompanied Barbara on calls for the first few months because, he says, "I wanted to learn how to do things her way."

Fortunately, "her way" and his way are not very far afield. "The clients seem to accept both of us because our styles are similar," says Barbara.

The practice operates within a 15-mile radius of Barbara's Phoenixville-area home, which is equipped with a pharmacy, lab, x-ray machine and surgery suite. There, Barbara does workups and surgery two days a week, with the help of her technician/receptionist. She also makes eight-to-ten housecalls daily for the balance of her six-day work week. George, who works as independent contractor, handles the wellness visits three days a week. The office faxes the medical records for each day's appointments to his West Chester home, so he doesn't need to go into the office regularly.

George does, however, phone in frequently to trade interesting stories with Barbara about his housecalls, seek her guidance on cases and, in his unobtrusive way, offer his opinions and ideas.

"My father's given me advice from his

lifetime of experience," Barbara says, "but overall the decisions on the management of the practice are mine and he doesn't interfere."

Today, Housecall Veterinarian is near maximum handling capacity, at 1,200-some clients. Barbara, 42, is limiting its growth to two new clients a week. Generally, George handles new-patient appointments, most of which are wellness visits. Then Barbara does their subsequent visit. The clients, many who are elderly, infirm, disabled or have multiple-pet households, seem to relish the idea of a father-daughter practice.

"It's sort of complementary that it's a housecall practice as well as a family practice, because of the intimacy," explains Barbara, who spends time with her father outside of work, even vacationing in Costa Rica with her parents a few years back.

The clients are not the only ones who are enriched by the familial nature of the business: Father and daughter benefit from a shared intimacy that transcends the typical coworker relationship. Thoroughly entertained by her father's folksy humor, Barbara's adoring laugh often punctuates George's sometimes corny anecdotes and amusing observations about his patients and their owners. Likewise, George finds working with Barbara gratifying. For one thing, it enables him to experience "the pride I get in her when I listen to clients tell how they think she does such a great job."

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