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Bettering the Lot of Israel's Animals

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by Joan Capuzzi Giresi, C'86 V'98

Dog fights, snake bites, *Leishmania*, and *Spirocerca lupi*. Not exactly day-fillers for the typical companion-animal practitioner. Unless, of course, you're **Sarah M. Levine, V'94**, who sees her share of such domestic scarcities while practicing veterinary medicine in Israel.

"Working in a foreign country exposes you to many diseases you learn about in school but don't necessarily see," says Levine, who moved to Israel 3½ years ago.

Levine ministers to Israel's dogs and cats—both owned and stray—through Concern for Helping Animals in Israel (CHAI), a non-profit organization focused on improving the lot of Israel's animals. As sole veterinarian for CHAI Israel, Levine navigates a mobile clinic through Israel, providing low-cost medical care for pets and spaying/neutering strays rounded up by municipal veterinarians and townspeople.

Among CHAI Israel's most vexing challenges is harnessing the stray-cat overpopulation, which, Levine laments, "is part of the landscape in Israel."

Levine also speaks at schools and community centers about the importance of veterinary care and empathy for animals, who, she says, have been somewhat neglected as a result of local cultural mores.

Because leash laws are largely ignored there and animals are allowed to roam free, Levine sees more than her share of trauma cases and cats sickened by FIV, which she says has infected approximately 30% of Israel's outdoor cats.

Furthermore, says Levine, quality preventive care is not the rule in Israel, where many owners turn to hormone therapy to block heat cycles rather than spay/neuter their pets. This widespread reluctance to pursue well care transcends wealth and education: Levine recalls working in one of Israel's most elite neighborhoods and meeting resistance to routine vaccination from pet owners, many of them high-ranking diplomats.

"If you're practicing veterinary medicine here," she explains, "you take a lot for granted in terms of owner knowledge. For instance, they have no concept of the fact that their pets' intestinal parasites can be transmitted to their family."



Levine's upbringing was far more enlightened about animals and science. Growing up in Pittsburgh, she and her six siblings gained an early understanding of clinical medicine from their father, an ear, nose, and throat doctor who made learning fun for his children.

"We knew the 12 cranial nerves when we were kids," she

recalls with a chuckle. "My father would say, 'The 10th nerve is the vagus nerve. It helps you swallow even when you're upside-down.' Then he would bring us into the living room and have us stand on our heads and eat food to prove to us that the vagus nerve worked."

Although her father, who held mock medical rounds with his clan at the dinner table each night, encouraged Sarah to go into human medicine, a veterinary career was a foregone conclusion for her. "I always loved animals and had a nice way with them," says Levine, 34, whose childhood home was filled with pets. "We would go to the petting zoo and all the animals would come to me."

An English literature major at Stern College for Women (part of Yeshiva University) in New York City, Levine fulfilled her science requirements on the side and became the first Stern graduate to go to veterinary school. Accepted to two other schools, she chose Penn for its fine reputation and its proximity to her grandmother and aunt, who lived in Philadelphia.

Following school, Levine spent a few years in small-animal practice in central New Jersey. When her husband, an attorney working in the

venture-capital industry, was offered a job in Israel, they eagerly relocated there in early 2000.

After settling her three young daughters into their new home in Ra'anana, a suburb just north of Tel Aviv, Levine hit the books in preparation for Israel's veterinary boards. An orthodox Jew with a Zionist upbringing, Levine was amply schooled in Hebrew and even had spent a year in Israel during college. But while drilling for the national boards, which were not offered in English, she realized that Hebrew was as much as second language for her as was large-animal medicine. She still cringes when she remembers "studying blue tongue and all those other large-animal diseases in Hebrew."

Although many veterinarians in Israel are unemployed due to oversupply, Levine says her Penn education made her a favorable job candidate. In her early days of small-animal practice in Israel, her Hebrew—which has since improved—was still a slight hindrance. "I could sound like the doctor if I was explaining diabetes in English. But in Hebrew..." she trails off.



The language barrier was not Levine's only hurdle. "It's still a challenge to mesh culturally. Here, it's important to be very subtle, gentle, diplomatic and not come off as superior. You have to lead [clients] into thinking that something was their idea."

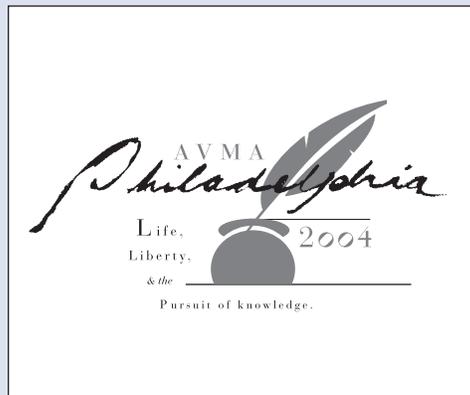
Levine, who keeps current on her continuing-education requirements in the States, also has had to familiarize herself with an entirely different cache of animal afflictions from what she was accustomed to seeing in the U.S. (She also has had to bid adieu to some, such as heartworm and endocrine diseases, which she

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AVMA Annual Convention Alumni Reception

Nearly 75 Penn Veterinary Medicine alumni and their guests attended an alumni reception during the American Veterinary Medical Association Annual Convention in Denver on July 20, 2003. **Associate Dean Jeffrey A. Wortman, V'69**, provided an update on current activities at the School.

Plans are being made for a special alumni reception on the top floor of the Loews Philadelphia Hotel, located in the landmark PSFS Building, in honor of the 2004 Annual Convention being held in Philadelphia, "The Place that Loves You Back," July 24-28.



Two Alumni Join AVMA

Raymond Stock, V'75, and **Mark Lutschaunig, V'88**, have been named new assistant directors in the American Veterinary Medical Association's Governmental Relations Division office in Washington, D.C. They will be responsible for monitoring the activities of Congress and federal regulatory agencies while providing liaison activities for the veterinary medicine profession to the federal government and applicable agencies on a variety of issues that could impact the profession.

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rarely sees in Israel.) She credits Penn for her ability to make this mental transition.

"Penn Vet really teaches you how to problem-solve in a very organized, efficient manner so you can approach something you've never seen before very systematically," she explains.

When Alexandria, Va.-based CHAI approached her about starting an offshoot in Israel, Levine welcomed the opportunity. "I was excited to be able to make a difference," says Levine, who brought the U.S.-made mobile clinic to the streets last March. "In a country that's young, you can really make a difference and pave the way."

Recently, Levine worked with Israel's agricultural (veterinary services), environmental, and health ministries to end the strychnine poisoning of strays. Also, she was invited to spay/neuter animals in Orthodox communities around Jerusalem, where heretofore these procedures have been prohibited.

While the mobile unit, which is also manned by a driver and a veterinary technician, travels only to familiar neighborhoods, Levine hopes to bring CHAI Israel's veterinary services to Arab towns that are known to be safe. In August, she took the clinic into the desert to vaccinate and spay/neuter the dogs of the nomadic Bedouins and educate the group about responsible pet ownership. She says that raising Israel's veterinary standard of care is a first critical step in cracking down on needless disease and suffering in animals.

For more information on CHAI, visit www.chai-online.org.