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Vetting on the Environment

by Joan Capuzzi Giresi, C'86, V'98

It was a pivotal moment for **Bethany J. Grohs, V'98**, one she remembers well. As a career-planning exercise in a third-year course at Penn Veterinary Medicine, she and her classmates were asked to fast-forward five years beyond graduation: Where did they hope to be professionally?

"I wrote down that I wanted to be part of a team that does multidisciplinary problem-solving on environmental issues internationally. But," she soberly recalls, "I figured that a job like this didn't really exist for a veterinarian."

Happily, Grohs proved herself wrong. As a veterinary medical officer with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Environmental Response Team in Edison, N.J., she manages the animal side of the environmental contamination equation.

Since joining EPA in 1999, Grohs, 33, has collaborated with the National Marine Fisheries Service to collect environmental health samples from bottlenose dolphins, investigated suspected cases of bovine fluorosis associated with industrial emissions, and assisted with the foot-and-mouth disease outbreak in the U.K.

Grohs, whose job post-9/11 includes collaborating with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security on counterterrorism issues, also designed a decontamination system for the World Trade Center search-and-rescue dogs, and investigated related toxin exposures. (She lectured at Penn Veterinary Medicine on Disasters, Disease, and Defense in April.) And she helped coordinate response efforts to the anthrax crisis at Capitol Hill.

Her field work is balanced in equal parts with policymaking, a combination, she says, that offers unique advantages: "In the office, you write policy that makes practical sense. And then when you're in the field, you can understand how those decisions have been made."

To bolster this decision-making process, Grohs, who takes call one week every other month for national environmental emergencies, has initiated contact with EPA's 11 other veterinarians—all researchers—to weave the results of their scientific investigations into policy.

Growing up on a farm in coastal Maine, Grohs spent her youth hiking, camping, riding horses, and developing an enduring apprecia-

tion for animals and the outdoors. During her junior year at Colby College, where she studied biology and chemistry, Grohs spent a semester assessing wildlife parks in Africa. There, she grasped the impact of park management on the hardness of the animal residents.

Her nagging desire to become a veterinarian



Dr. Grohs with U.S. Senator Harry Reid (D-Nev.).

was tempered by the discouraging advice of her college advisers, who reminded her of the difficulty of being accepted into veterinary school. So following graduation, Grohs headed back into the outdoors, working as a wrangler at an Arabian horse ranch in Wyoming. This led to a job at a local veterinary practice and a rekindling of her desire to pursue veterinary medicine.

After graduating from veterinary school, she headed out to Montana to work in mixed-animal practice. She enjoyed her year in clinical practice, particularly the opportunity to readily quantify the fruits of her daily efforts. "At the end of the day, for instance, I could go home knowing I spayed three animals."

In her subsequent government work, the pursuit of results requires considerably more patience. "The way you deal with the red tape," she explains, "is to keep a long-term perspective

and know you're getting a little bit done at a time."

Grohs, a member of the American Veterinary Medical Association's Committee for Environmental Issues, notes a striking similarity between clinical practice and ecologic risk assessment. She likens the latter to a ten-minute

exam on a pet—"but on a much bigger scale"—from history-taking to diagnostics to treatment plan.

And just as in clinical medicine, she notes, her regulatory role requires her to be a good communicator. "You need to be able to explain scientific concepts well. But," she adds, "you also need to be a good listener and not just a font of knowledge."

As an EPA veterinary medical officer, Grohs must communicate in a broad range of situations that vary considerably in formality, from spontaneous exchanges with farmers in barns to planned briefings before the U.S. Senate.

Whether she is meeting with members of Congress, producers or industrial workers, Grohs observes that introducing herself as a "veterinarian" rather than as an "environmental regulator" or even a "scientist" opens the door to more positive interactions in her work. "People stand up all the time

and say, 'I'm a scientist.' But when I say, 'I'm a veterinarian,' there is a much different sense—that you're someone who really cares."

Indeed, Grohs cares immensely about the fitness of our fauna and flora. While many governmental resources are directly devoted to reducing human health risk, she explains, "I focus on the environmental health risk because if you have a healthy ecosystem, the people will be fine."

Banfield, the Pet Hospital, has announced the recent hiring of three alumni at their veterinary hospitals: **Gregory L. Cusanno, V'70**, and **Carrie A. Hutchinson, V'01**, practicing in Warminster, Pa.; and **Corinne Majeska, V'03**, practicing in Cherry Hill, N.J.