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Faculty Profile: Rebecka Hess, DVM, DACVIM

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Rebecka Hess, DVM, DACVIM

Name: Rebecka Hess, DVM, DACVIM

Birthplace: Boston, MA

Positions: Dr. Hess is an Associate Professor of Medicine–Clinician Educator, Department of Clinical Studies, and Chief of the Section of Medicine.

Research interests: Clinical and genetic studies of canine diabetes mellitus as well as studies of other endocrine (hormonal) disorders in dogs and cats.

Beginnings: “Growing up in Israel, I didn’t know that I would be a vet,” says Rebecka Hess. After graduating from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1988 with a degree in biology, Hess enrolled in the University’s brand-new Koret School of Veterinary Medicine. “It was an exciting time to be at Koret – a great adventure,” she remembers. “There were only twenty students in my class, and very few of them women.”

Dudley Johnston, a veterinary surgeon at Koret who had been a faculty member at Penn, encouraged Hess to seek a position at Penn. “I was thrilled when I arrived in Philadelphia and saw the dazzling resources available here,” she recalls. “I was elated to be part of such an institution, and I still am. It’s heaven!”

Earning Distinction: In her first year at Penn, Hess was inspired by working with endocrinologist Carol Zerbe, who helped her with the rare and intriguing case of a cat with Cushing’s disease. Treatment with surgery and medication were successful, and Hess presented the case in grand rounds. Hess laughs as she recalls the grouchy cat: “I know the medication was bitter, because the cat spit it back on me. We both survived.”

Hooked on endocrinology, Hess began to focus her research on diabetes. Today, she runs the Penn Vet Diabetes Program, which has completed studies that have given important insight into understanding common and potentially life threatening complications of diabetes. The program continues to investigate ways of optimizing insulin treatment of our diabetic patients. On-going collaborations with Dr. Paula Henthorn are focused on identification of genetic markers associated with diabetes in Samoyeds and Australian Terriers which are at increased risk for the disease. Identification of such genetic markers in young, unaffected, breeding dogs will enable breeders to determine which dogs should not be bred to one another years before the onset of the disease. This may help prevent diabetes in these specific breeds, and possibly in other dogs. Early collaborations with Dr. Jake Kushner from



Photo by John Donges

Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia may also lead to new understandings of the pathophysiology of diabetes in dogs.

Her favorite things about her job? Hess is passionate about getting residents interested in endocrinology (she would like to start a diabetic fellowship at Penn Vet), and loves the fact that she gets “to hug and kiss a dog every day.” She walks to work from her home in West Philadelphia and enjoys taking her young sons to feed the ducks at the Bio Pond.

Recent Publications:

Murray, A. Gasser, R. Hess. Transient hyperglycaemia in a pre-diabetic dog treated with prednisone and cyclosporine A. *Australian Veterinary Journal*, 87(9):352-355, 2009.

C. Palm, R. Boston, K. Refsal, R. Hess. An investigation of the action of NPH human analogue insulin in dogs with naturally-occurring diabetes mellitus. *Journal of Veterinary Internal Medicine* 23:50–55, 2009.

M. Morgan, C. Vite, A. Radhakrishnan, R. Hess. Clinical peripheral neuropathy associated with diabetes mellitus in 3 dogs. *Canadian Veterinary Journal*, 49(6):583–586, 2008.

J. Adler J, K. Drobatz, R. Hess. Assessment of electrolyte abnormalities in dogs with hypoadrenocorticism. *Journal of Veterinary Internal Medicine* 21:1168–1173, 2007.

R. Hess, P. Kass, T. Van Winkle. Association between atherosclerosis and glomerulopathy in dogs. *The International Journal of Applied Research in Veterinary Medicine*, 4(3): 224–231, 2006.

D. Hume, K. Drobatz, R. Hess. Outcome of dogs with diabetic ketoacidosis: 127 dogs (1993–2003). *Journal of Veterinary Internal Medicine* 20; 547–555, 2006. 🐾