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College Cornell People

Shelter Helps Veterinary Students Gain Important Skills

To many newly graduated DVMs, the first surgery performed on their own can be daunting. Cornell's veterinary program has a long history of providing students with highly supervised opportunities to practice their skills, gain speed, and improve their techniques while they are still students. One opportunity, for example, has roots in a nearly decade-old partnership with Lollypop Farm, the Humane Society of Greater Rochester. Students from Cornell's College of Veterinary Medicine are able to participate in an externship at the shelter, building upon their knowledge of shelter medicine and giving them the opportunity to hone their surgical skills—before they graduate.

When Dr. Janet Scarlett, professor of epidemiology and director of Maddie's® Shelter Medicine Program, approached Lollypop Farm to serve as a field training site for the College's shelter medicine program, Dr. Andrew Newmark, Lollypop Farm's chief veterinarian, seized the opportunity as a way to share a positive view of shelter medicine with the future generation of veterinarians. Since the onset of the program approximately nine years ago, nearly 60 students have completed an externship at Lollypop Farm.

"When I got out of vet school, I struggled with the surgeries" said Dr. Newmark. "I didn't feel as though I received enough hands-on training to prepare me for the 'real-world.' It may take an inexperienced student 45 minutes to 90 minutes to complete a cat spay, whereas a seasoned veterinarian can usually complete the procedure in 7-8 minutes. I want to provide students with the additional experience to help build their confidence and increase their surgical abilities."

Dr. Newmark's goal for students dovetails well with the goals of the College. Enhancing primary care training for students at Cornell's College of Veterinary Medicine is a key element of the College's Strategic Plan. The two-week externship exposes students to spay/neuter surgeries, care of animals in shelters, and methods used to prevent animals from going to shelters. They also participate in the removal of tumors and bladder stones, amputations, and orthopedic work. With Lollypop Farm's in-house investigation team, students witness the exploration of animal cruelty cases firsthand, learning what to look for, what to do, and how to document suspected cruelty. Students watch Dr. Newmark conduct forensic necropsies, learning how they differ from typical necropsies.

Shelter medicine poses different challenges than those found in a private practice, according to Dr. Newmark, who said that many shelters don't have the money to run multiple tests on an animal. "Students must be very thorough during the physical exams," Dr. Newmark explained, adding that one of his goals for the experience is to help students understand the importance of herd health. He stresses that herd health management is another important aspect of shelter medicine. "If one animal becomes sick, many others are immediately at risk," said Dr. Newmark.

Veterinary students who have completed the externship have nothing but praise for the work that Dr. Newmark is doing at Lollypop Farm and for the additional training the experience provides. Kevin Nagel DVM '09 participated in an externship at Lollypop Farm in February in order to build upon what he had learned at Cornell and because he wanted more surgical experience.

"The externship at Lollypop was one of my favorite rotations," said Dr. Nagel. "Dr. Newmark helped me become more confident as a surgeon and gave me a greater appreciation for shelter medicine. During my two weeks there, I was able to perform 42 surgeries on a variety of animals. I now feel comfortable performing most types of spay/neuter surgeries without supervision, which is a huge relief as I start my first job at a small animal private practice in California."



Dr. Andrew Newmark, right, shown with Dr. Cathlin Craver DVM '07, a former student who participated in the externship and now works at Lollypop Farm part-time.