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Taking a bite out of dental disease



A conversation with Dr. Santiago Peralta, veterinary dentist, oral surgeon, and new Lecturer in the Department of Clinical Sciences' Section of Dentistry.

What path led you to your new position?

I grew up and studied in Colombia, South America, and graduated with a veterinary degree from La Salle University in 1999. In Botoga I worked in private practice for seven years and became interested in dentistry and oral surgery. As my interest grew, I decided to pursue further study in this specialty and completed a 3-year residency in veterinary dentistry at UC Davis between 2006-2009. Returning home, I resumed private practice until coming to Cornell in Summer 2011.

What will you offer as part of the dentistry service?

We offer state of the art dental and oral care for animal patients. Our service deals with small and large animals, and my focus will be small animals, mostly dogs and cats. I also have experience with exotic pets such as rabbits, chinchillas, and guinea pigs, as well as zoo animals including tigers, hyenas, orangutans, and more.

Our most common dental treatments deal with periodontal disease (gum disease), the most prevalent disease of animals. Other advanced dental procedures we offer include endodontics (root canals) to fractured teeth, orthodontics to correct bite abnormalities, oral surgery following facial trauma or to remove tumors.

What innovations do you bring to CUHA?

I've helped move our service from hand instrumentation techniques to more precise rotary root canal instrumentation techniques that provide more reliable results, higher success rates, and lower anesthesia times. These newer techniques come together with safer and more effective materials that allow success rates of therapy similar to that seen in humans.

Do you have research plans?

My main research interest involves tooth resorption, a common cat and dog disease in which the teeth degrade and disappear. Nobody has figured out why, and that is a question I'd like to pursue. I am also interested in research concerning oral tumors and oral radiology.

What do you like about your job so far?

I like the academic culture, and the opportunity to provide real clinical instruction. Interacting with students and other specialists offers a stimulating educational environment where everyone has something to learn. The opportunity to help out the community, clients, and local veterinarians is very rewarding.

Why is dentistry important and how can owners help?

Dental disease can lead not only to oral discomfort and pain, but can dramatically affect the general health of an animal. It can cause inflammation and infection that can spread to other organs or turn the blood toxic through permanent bacterial infection. Pets may stop eating, bleed from the mouth, and show discomfort.

Animals are very stoic in nature; they are good at hiding pain. Owners underestimate dental disease and often don't realize their pets are suffering from it until it's too late. Owners can help by bringing pets in for yearly routine oral exams, yearly or biyearly professional dental treatment. Toothbrushing is the only way to prevent periodontal disease. Just like in humans, it should be done every day.

Oral hygiene is very important for pets, and the magnitude of disease is difficult to appreciate until after treatment. The improvement in a pet's demeanor following treatment can be amazing to see.