Finding a home in shelter medicine

Inspired by a life-changing sabbatical in the USA, Annette Litster found her way into shelter medicine. An openness to change has fuelled a career full of twists and turns.

I SEEM to have road-tested a diverse range of veterinary careers during my 30+ year career – private practice, university research and teaching, veterinary journal editing and now industry. Veterinary medicine has provided me with a completely different working experience every day and a firm belief in my own ability to adapt to change and be a lifelong learner.

The early part of my career followed a more traditional track – private small animal practice in the city where I graduated, Brisbane. A major turning point came 16 years after graduation, when my family travelled to Philadelphia and I had the opportunity to take a six-month sabbatical at the University of Pennsylvania. I had always viewed university practice in the USA as the absolute pinnacle and my experience there did not disappoint. Despite being instructed by my Brisbane boss to keep my mouth shut and my ears open during my time at UPenn, the unbridled American enthusiasm and drive quickly overtook me and I gained the confidence to ask questions – lots of them! My colleagues’ patient answers jump-started my steep learning curve, but I was soon hooked on self-education. Finding the answers to the endless questions that came up in the course of my day became like an itch that I just couldn’t help but scratch. I arrived back in Australia determined to go back to the USA, and a specialist qualification in feline medicine (FANZCVSc), a PhD and a masters degree in clinical epidemiology were the stepping stones I used over the next nine years.

When I arrived at Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana, for my first faculty position, my head of department took a look at my qualifications and commented: ‘It looks like you’d be a good fit for a shelter medicine programme’. With an excellent proposal written by a Purdue colleague (Larry Glickman) in hand, I approached Maddie’s Fund, a family foundation established in 1999, whose mission ‘To revolutionize the status and wellbeing of companion animals’, makes good on a promise the founders made to their beloved miniature schnauzer, Maddie, to give back to her kind in dollars that which Maddie gave to them in companionship and love. I quickly learned from my colleagues at Maddie’s Fund that even such lofty goals are achievable with vision, hard work, persistence and intelligence. We were awarded a generous grant for a comprehensive shelter medicine programme and I entered the exciting world of shelter medicine research, where a population approach means that lives can be saved by the thousand.

Over the next six years, the Purdue Maddie’s Shelter Medicine Program grew to meet its three core goals – to educate and train future leaders in the field of shelter medicine; to conduct practically relevant research in the areas of shelter medicine and pet homelessness; and to develop leadership in public education, dissemination of information and continuing education in shelter medicine.

We partnered with two resourceful and openhearted Mid-Western shelters – PAWS Chicago and the Humane Society of Indianapolis. Most US shelters have a corporate-style management structure, with shelter veterinarians, veterinary technicians, staff and volunteers all eventually reporting to an executive director. Of course, there is a very wide spectrum of ‘shelters’, since there are no legal or other criteria for what a shelter is, and many don’t have the luxury of even part-time veterinary support. Even a name might not be what it seems, since ‘Humane Society’ or ‘SPCA’ as part of a shelter name in the USA does not imply any relationship with the Humane Society of the United States or the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Additionally, while a ‘municipal shelter’ is usually the local shelter responsible for receiving homeless animals collected by city animal control officers, the definition of a ‘limited admission’ or ‘adoption-guarantee’ (formerly the more divisive term ‘no-kill’) shelter is at the whim of the shelter concerned.

The shelter team balances limited resources to optimise life-saving capacity as a never-ending stream of homeless and owner-relinquished animals arrive daily. Shelter veterinarians primarily use a population management approach to inform everyday decisions about the animals in their care, although it is inevitable that they also develop more traditional individual veterinary patient relationships. A typical week involves intake physical exams, triage, vaccination and deworming, as well as daily rounds with animals held at the shelter for veterinary treatment before adoption or transfer. Feline infectious diseases are a particular focus and much of my shelter medicine research was designed...
to investigate the practical management of endemic upper respiratory tract disease in shelter-housed cats. Interestingly, this is in direct contrast to the UK situation, where modern, spacious cat housing and fewer cats admitted to shelters often seems to result in much reduced incidence of disease. Shelter-based canine behaviour programmes are also a vital link to successful ‘forever homes’ for many dogs and, while accurate behaviour assessment at shelter intake and successful modification techniques are fundamental, this is an active area of research with many goals yet to be achieved. Spay/neuter surgery dominates the shelter operating theatre, with many surgeons neutering 40 to 60 dogs and cats in an average day, but it can also include a wide variety of surgeries designed to increase the adoptability of otherwise healthy pets, such as routine dentistry, wound repair and orthopaedic surgery.

The Association of Shelter Veterinarians (ASV), a vibrant and international group of over 800 members, has been instrumental in advancing the quality of care provided to shelter animals in many ways, such as through the Veterinary Medical Care Guidelines for Spay-Neuter Programs (Looney and others 2008) and the Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters (Newbury and others 2010). Student chapters of the ASV exist in 28 of the 30 US veterinary schools and internships and residencies in shelter medicine for veterinarians are increasingly popular. Just last year, shelter medicine became recognised as a specialty within the American Board of Veterinary Practitioners and the first brave souls are due to sit their examinations later this year.

I have now entered a new phase of my career, on the Veterinary Specialty Team at Zoetis, with shelter medicine and infectious diseases as my focus areas. The opportunity to travel the USA providing evidence-based education to help shelters and veterinarians has been exciting and challenging. At the very heart of it all is the love of animals that led me to a career in veterinary medicine in the first place. My quest for lifelong learning continues!

References


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