

Exotic Companion Mammal Specialty Soon Available To Veterinarians

The American Veterinary Medical Association recently granted provisional recognition to a new exotic mammal specialty for veterinarians.

Posted: May 1, 2008, 5 p.m. EST

Soon veterinarians will have a new specialty to pursue, the Exotic Companion Mammal specialty, which focuses on common exotic mammals like rabbits, ferrets, guinea pigs, hamsters, mice, rats, hedgehogs, sugar gliders and gerbils. It's the first specialty recognized by the American Veterinary Medical Association since 1993, bringing the total specialties available to nine.

Efforts to create the ECM specialty began in 2004 under the leadership of Dr. Michael Dutton, co-founder of the Association of Exotic Mammal Veterinarians and chair of the ECM organizing committee. Almost 20 other veterinarians were involved.

The 2007 AVMA U.S. Pet Ownership & Demographics Sourcebook states that Americans own 6.2 million pet rabbits, 1.2 million hamsters, 1.1 million ferrets and a million guinea pigs, which is part of the reason that the ECM is needed. "Exotic companion mammals are becoming more numerous and clients are seeking care for these pets," Dutton said. "As we all know, they have unique physiologies and medical therapies."

New technologies have made treatment of exotic companion mammals possible. "Today, a veterinarian can visualize really small items like inspecting a tooth in the mouth of a hamster," Dutton said. "I have performed a C-section on a mouse. People are more attached to these little pets, and there is more we can do today to treat them."

Applicants for the ECM specialty must have six years of experience in the ECM field, letters of reference, relevant education and publication of articles in the field. Once they attain these, they must pass a two-day test. Credentialing and testing will be overseen by the American Board of Veterinary Practitioners.

The first examination of ECM candidates is expected to be in November 2009, followed by the first group of diplomates receiving certification in December 2009. All diplomates can be located through the ABVP website.

Should exotic companion mammal pet owners switch to an ECM veterinarian? Not necessarily. "Becoming an ECM specialist takes significant resources and prep time on the part of a veterinarian," Dutton said. "Not all who apply will meet the rigorous process. Some veterinarians will not choose this path. But there will be numerous veterinarians that are well-trained and knowledgeable about ECM but are not specialists. If you have a veterinarian that knows their stuff, I would not switch."

Dutton said that less common exotic mammals like flying squirrels, short-tailed opossum and skunks aren't covered in the ECM specialty, but that doesn't mean veterinarians can't treat them. It just means that the ECM process is weighted toward the commonly owned ECM.

This recognition must be approved by the AVMA House of Delegates, which is expected this summer. Even so, the recognition by the AVMA is temporary. "All new specialties are only granted provisional recognition," Dutton said. "Even fully recognized specialties are reviewed every five years. If they do not pass review, they may be granted limited recognition until the deficiencies are corrected." Dutton and the ECM committee plan to apply for full recognition of the ECM specialty, a process which can take several years.

Six other specialties are awaiting recognition, including one for reptiles and amphibians.