

Dr. Ruth Heller, A Ferret Friend

Veterinarian Ruth Heller goes out of her way to help ferrets and ferret owners.

By Rebecca Stout

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© Courtesy of Ruth Heller, DVM

Dr. Ruth Heller opened her own veterinary practice in 1995.

Ferret owners around the world are gearing up for the 2008 International Ferret Symposium in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania this November 7 to 9. They are waiting, with bated breath, for a special lecture from veterinarian Dr. Ruth Heller. Dr. Ruth, as she is known to many, will be revealing the preliminary results of a long-awaited distemper study. She is hoping that when concluded, this study will rock the ferret world.

A Call To Help

While growing up, it never occurred to Heller to do anything but help animals. The Pennsylvania resident was first interested in large animal medicine when she began school at Seton Hill University. Later she focused on small animal medicine and then, further down the road, she took great interest in ferrets. "I still like cows and horses, but I'm not so fond of cold barns anymore," she joked. She later graduated from the New York State College of Veterinary Medicine at Cornell University in 1993. Only two years later, she opened her own practice.

Beyond Medicine

Heller has always made time in her life to enjoy a wide variety of avocations outside of medicine. Dr. Karen Purcell, author of *Essentials of Ferrets: A Guide for Practitioners* lived just two doors down from Heller while attending Cornell. You might be surprised to learn that Heller and Purcell share one of the more unusual interests, science fiction and fantasy. The two are active in fan clubs dedicated to Pern Fandom (clubs based upon Anne McCaffrey's *Dragonriders of Pern* book series) and also frequent fan fests and conventions such as Confluence. When she isn't scribbling out stories about far-off adventures, she can be found playing with one of her four Great Danes, sewing ferret bedding, making jewelry or gardening.

Among her passions is ferret breeding. She and partner Beth Bowles own Ravensnest Ferrets. Her experience with breeding seems to have added another dimension to her practice. Bowles explains, "She seems to have become the local go-to vet for ferret pregnancy problems. People have brought her ferrets for surgery — mastitis emergency and v-hob surgery — from as far away as Columbus, Ohio. That's 3 1/2 hours away. She's consulted with vets in other states and Canada who needed info on ferret medicine." Heller is also an avid show-goer and competitor, with her ferrets often doing well in the Fine Point Specialty class.

Heller has contributed to various ferret interests. She was a founding member of the Three Rivers Ferret Club (now named Three Rivers Ferret Council) and is currently a member of the Heart of Ohio Ferret Association (HOFA). She is actively involved with the American Ferret Association as a veterinary and breeder member, and is on the Committee for Health Affairs. She has a strong online presence on the Ferret Breeders Network group. It is mind-boggling to think about the many endless hours she has donated to the online Ferret Health List (FHL). Ferret enthusiasts and professionals from all over the world benefit from the exchange of cutting edge ideas, advice and experience within this Internet group. Many lives, furred and not, have been touched by Dr. Heller's valuable advice over the years on this list.

It was on the FHL that Heller rendered a historic contribution. Her keen eye once picked up on something she had been seeing over time on and off the list. What appeared as random cases of severely ill kits with varying and vague symptoms to the inexperienced eye looked quite different to Heller. "I was the first person to speculate — on the FHL — that the illness I'd been seeing with high fevers, enlarged lymph nodes and dying baby ferrets was an emerging disease. It was later described and named [DIM] by some of my colleagues and is now well-known. I'm not really proud of that, though, I wish I'd been wrong." An observation and theory that clearly led to saving lives even to this day.

© Courtesy of Ruth Heller, DVM

Mongo lost his life when he suffered an adverse reaction to a vaccination against deadly canine distemper.

Distemper Dilemma

Her best-known contribution has unfortunately also stemmed from great heartache. It is a well-known and dreaded problem in the modern ferret world that ferret owners must decide whether or not to vaccinate their pets for canine distemper. For

some it's an easy choice, as distemper is 100 percent deadly among ferrets. But for many there is much hand-wringing due to their ferrets' sensitivity to the vaccines, which can turn deadly in some cases.

Far too many of those reactions have haunted Heller's life. One in particular is Mongo. Mongo was a young, vibrant and beloved pet that died all too soon.

"Mongo was my ferret, you see," Bowles said. "I'd had him less than a year before he died. He only needed about 80 points to reach his AFA Gold championship, and I promised his breeder that I'd show him until he reached it. He needed a distemper vaccination, so I sent him off to the clinic with Ruth. He'd never had a reaction before, and that day he went into anaphylactic shock. Ruth worked on him and kept him on oxygen until he seemed to be doing better, and then she brought him home, but he died on the way. My special hope for the study is that no one else has to go through that."

Friends have said that the episode was gut-wrenching for Heller and affected her greatly. Fellow breeders Mike and Arita Morrett of Savannah Lakes Ferretry relay that Mongo became the inspiration and motivation behind the distemper study.

The vaccination risk is a long-heated debate among ferret owners — to vaccinate or not to vaccinate, and if so, how often? With the support of the AFA and colleagues around the country, Heller has embarked on a titer study to find answers.

"We are collecting data to try and get statistical proof that antibody titers against canine distemper not only are well above what we ought to be able to consider protective, but also that the antibody level persists for a significant length of time.

Heller noted that the actual protective number has not been determined, and that she is currently doubling what is known to be protective in dogs, sea lions and the big cats, and considering that number to be likely protective in ferrets.

"I hope to be able to show that high levels of antibody persist for several years," Heller said. "If so, there will be some real evidence for not needing to vaccinate annually, thus decreasing the likelihood of a ferret having a vaccine reaction."

Heller knows that she can't bring back all of the little souls whose lives ended so needlessly. Her goal is to prevent the heartbreak of future losses and give owners more time to savor the many joys of ferret ownership. When asked what her favorite of those joys is, she had trouble deciding. "The way they smell when they're sleeping, kisses with little sandpapery tongues, the leap of joy when they get out to play, the big sigh when they settle down to sleep in your lap — hmm, guess I can't choose just one."

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Rebecca Stout resides in rural Tennessee with her husband, two sons and beloved pets. Ferrets have been in her heart and life for 30 years. She enjoys writing, photography, animals and being a strong advocate for her autistic son. To visit her website, [click here](#)>>