

Veterinarians Bridge The Knowledge Gap To Become Ferret-Savvy

Resources are on the rise for veterinarians who strive to be ferret-savvy.

By Jennifer Mons McLaughlin

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Ferrets might be a mystery to a veterinarian if he or she hasn't actively pursued knowledge about them.

Not long ago Shelly Knudsen, who ran a shelter at the time, routinely brought ferrets to her veterinarian and discussed health issues. "My vet didn't know much about ferrets," she said. "We learned together."

She didn't know it at first, but that experience would change her. The realization that she was learning along with her veterinarian encouraged Knudsen in pursuing her passion.

"Because of what I learned, that prompted me to go back to school to become a veterinarian," she said. "I went to school because of ferrets."

Now Shelly Knudsen, DVM, successfully treats ferrets at the All Feline Hospital in Lincoln, Neb. And while her love of ferrets may have persuaded Knudsen to attend school, once there she found that specialized information on ferrets was scarce.

"Unfortunately, in school they really don't teach much [about ferrets]," she said. "We had two days of ferrets and that was at a school with a strong exotics department."

In addition to completing an exotics rotation and externship to learn ferret surgery, Knudsen actively pursued every opportunity she could in treating ferrets.

"In school you need to learn every animal — it's not an option — so they knew who I was in the exotics department the first year," she said. "I organized ferret days where we had lectures on ferrets in the morning and set up hands-on ferret wet labs in the afternoon. Pretty much everyone in my class knew me as the ferret person."

Like Knudsen, veterinarians pursuing ferret-specific knowledge need to be proactive. "Since the scope of veterinary medicine is so large — horses, dogs, cows, cats, pigs, etc. — a veterinary student cannot become competent in all species ... it's just impossible," said Michael Dutton, DVM, Diplomate ABVP (CF). "So you can have a veterinarian who has never taken a college course on ferrets."

However, veterinarians gain the general knowledge necessary. "Many of the anatomical and physiology concepts a student learns while doing these other species can easily be transported to the ferret realm," Dutton said.

The good news is that veterinarians do have a wealth of information and opportunity to draw from. From conferences and internships to rotations and mentors, acquiring advanced ferret knowledge isn't as difficult as it used to be.

"It is a lot easier today to gain the necessary knowledge and experience than it was 10 years ago," said Anne K. G. Bazilwich, DVM, and director of Health Affairs for the American Ferret Association.

ECM Specialty

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In Pursuit of Knowledge

The American Ferret Association offers a two-day advanced course for veterinarians on ferret management. According to the AFA, these conferences, held approximately every 18 months to two years, are designed to help veterinarians meet the growing demand for quality ferret care, encourage new practitioners to learn more about ferrets and provide continuing education for experienced ferret veterinarians.

Large veterinary conferences also offer lectures, possible wet labs and ferret-specific continuing education for those desiring to delve deeper into ferret-specifics. "All of the very large national veterinary meetings have excellent sessions that

include ferrets and small mammals,” said Natalie Antinoff, DVM, Diplomate AVBP (Avian).

Some of the many conferences include the North American Veterinary Conference, Western Veterinary Conference, the AAV Conference and Expo with the Association of Exotic Mammal Veterinarians, and the Central Veterinary Conference. The American Veterinary Medical Association publishes additional continuing education opportunities on its website monthly.

Major conferences, post-graduate seminars and continuing education can help fill the void for ferret knowledge. “As mentioned, many aspects of dog/cat physiology, anatomy, etc. is transferable to ferret medicine quite easily,” Dutton said. However, “I think that to treat ferrets you need to do preparatory continuing education on ferrets and have some mentoring.”

Finding A Ferret-Savvy Vet

Dr. Michael Dutton offers pet owners the following tips when seeking a ferret-savvy veterinarian.

1. Be informed about the number of years they have been treating ferrets and their amount of ferret continuing education.
2. Research whether the vet has been published in any publications that show an interest in ferrets.
3. Get referrals from other ferret owners, websites, etc.
4. Find out if the veterinarian is a member of the Association of Exotic Mammal Veterinarians.
5. Ask if the veterinarian is a member of VIN or ExoticDVM.
6. Search the veterinarian’s website and view his or her exotics resume, if available.

Becoming Actively Involved

Veterinarians who have been practicing for years are a valuable resource that shouldn’t be overlooked.

“New veterinarians should talk to other veterinarians because they can learn from them,” said Jerry Murray, DVM, Animal Clinic of Farmers Branch in Dallas. “When I first started doing ferrets, I used to call Dr. Brown in Chicago and Dr. Fox in Massachusetts. Now I’ve been working with ferrets for 17 years.”

Bazilwich said a veterinarian who wants to get ferret experience should introduce themselves to a ferret-knowledgeable colleague and ask if they might be allowed to observe ferret treatment or surgery. “I think it would be very well received,” she said.

Many benefits come from working alongside experienced veterinarians. “There are internships and residencies in exotic medicine that cover a lot for ferrets,” Dutton said. “I routinely get resumes from new graduates looking to work here because they are interested in exotic pet practice.”

Countless learning possibilities exist locally as well. “A great way for a veterinarian to improve their expertise with ferrets is to contact [their] local ferret rescue organization and begin working with them,” Antinoff said. “Many ferrets in shelters are older and so the veterinarian will gain experience in many of the common ferret diseases, but will also become familiar with handling and treating the normal ferrets.”

Veterinarians should join professional groups, such as the AEMV and the AFA. Discussions are priceless and various veterinary online discussion groups, particularly VIN, come highly recommended.

“We also provide a critical links section associated with our website that we hope would help a veterinarian who seeks ferret-related information,” said Francine Prager, co-director and event planner for the International Ferret Congress.

A new specialty will soon be available to veterinarians seeking to gain an even greater understanding of ferrets. (See the sidebar, ECM Specialty) “There are a good number of vets who are excellent at treating ferrets,” Dutton said. “Some will want to seek certification as a way to express their interest, expertise and passion for treating exotic companion mammals.”

Being Prepared

Ferret know-how is more accessible than at any other time in history, and it is keeping veterinarians on their toes.

“Ferret owners are reading the medical books that veterinarians are,” Knudsen said. “One thing I’ve heard from vets is owners come in prepared with 20 questions because when they come they have done the research.”

Everyone, even veterinarians, needs to start somewhere. By taking advantage of conferences, seminars, relationships, medical journals and discussion groups, veterinarians can become ferret-savvy in their own right. “There is quite a small but dedicated exotic pet practice community out there that is very supportive,” Dutton said.



Dedication is a must for learning more about ferrets. "A lot of it is self directed, but I think that's important," Basilwich said. "If it comes easy it may not be worth remembering."

Jennifer Mons McLaughlin lives in Minnesota and has been writing about the pet industry for more than 10 years.