Shelter Medicine: More Educational Opportunities, More Lives Saved

Before the early 2000s, veterinarians working in animal shelters faced a daunting situation: their small animal private practice skills, although useful for individual cases, were not always helpful to address what is commonly referred to as “herd health.” Little formal training existed for the population management of cats and dogs, and no animal-shelter-specific classes were offered in veterinary school, let alone internships, residencies, or national conference tracks.
A change began in 1999, when Dr. Jan Scarlett, a veterinary epidemiologist, taught the first shelter medicine elective course at Cornell University. Two years later, Dr. Kate Hurley completed the world’s first shelter medicine residency at the University of California, Davis. Then the Shelter Medicine for Veterinarians and Staff and Infectious Disease Management in Animal Shelters textbooks were published in 2004 and 2009, respectively.1,2

In 2014, the American Board of Veterinary Practitioners (AVBP) recognized shelter medicine as a board-certified specialty. The specialty’s unique aspects include infectious disease control and prevention; facility design; cleaning and disinfection; high-volume, high-quality spay and neuter; animal cruelty investigation and veterinary forensics; and animal behavior, enrichment, and well-being.

Shelter medicine care, which includes medical and surgery cases, is not limited to only dogs and cats but can also involve exotic species, farm animals, and wildlife. Shelter medicine veterinary professionals also often play a community role, working with civic leaders and officials on shelter budgets, facilities, and policies.

Shelter medicine has finally been recognized for what it is: a specialty field requiring a unique set of skills and a mindset quite different from that of small animal private practice.

Educational Opportunities
Educational opportunities are now readily available for those wishing to be involved in shelter medicine. The Association of Shelter Veterinarians (ASV), founded in 2001, now has more than 750 members, as well as student chapters at 28 North American veterinary colleges. According to the Veterinary Internship and Residency Matching Program (VIRMP), 5 one-year shelter medicine internships (and often more through large private shelters via non-VIRMP applications) and 5 shelter medicine residency programs are offered (currently at the University of California, Davis, University of Florida, Mississippi State University, Cornell University, and the Oregon Humane Society).

In addition to these training programs for new veterinary graduates, fellowships, continuing education, and certificate programs—including many online options—are increasingly available for any veterinarians with an interest in shelter medicine.

Training and educational opportunities are also numerous for veterinary technicians and support team members. Large veterinary conferences, including the North American Veterinary Community (NAVC) Conference, offer shelter medicine tracks. Smaller conferences are increasingly focusing on shelter medicine, including the ASPCA/Cornell Maddie’s Shelter Medicine Conference held each summer at Cornell University and the University of Florida’s annual Maddie’s Shelter Medicine Conference. Local events, such as the Central New York Shelter Forum hosted by Cornell’s Maddie’s Shelter Medicine Program, bring shelter professionals together for lectures and idea-sharing.

Other Learning Tools
Shelter medicine leaders have made excellent use of webcasts and other online resources. Since 2010, more than 400 webcasts on topics from grant applications to prosecuting animal cruelty to parvovirus and panleukopenia have been presented by
several organizations, most notably the Maddie’s Fund Maddie’s Institute (maddiesfund.org), ASPCA Professional (aspcapro.org/training), and PetSmart Charities (petsmartcharities.org). These webcasts provide team-training tools, guidance for team members new to shelter medicine, and advanced knowledge for experienced shelter team members.

For the new generations of veterinary professionals pursuing the shelter medicine field, the sky is the limit. Veterinary colleges and veterinary technology programs often offer training in partnership with animal shelters. Some students find the high caseload and unique environment desirable, while others who may not have realized the challenges and rewards of working in an animal shelter develop a new interest. It Has Only Just Begun

The first discussions about a shelter medicine elective course took place a little more than 15 years ago. No textbooks existed. No lectures were given. Since then, a handful of determined leaders have crafted a specialty field to support the countless worldwide animal welfare organizations. Shelter medicine textbooks have been published. The first group of AVBP (Shelter Medicine)-qualified veterinarians is about to be introduced.

It is difficult to name any other field in veterinary medicine that has experienced such advancement in such a short period of time. And this is just the beginning.

Editor’s note: Dr. Nicole Putney graduated from the Washington State University College of Veterinary Medicine, completed a shelter medicine internship at Cornell University, and has since worked as a shelter staff veterinarian and consultant. Her special interests include infectious disease management, veterinary forensics, and shelter animal behavior and enrichment.

References