

Canine specialists

In the human medical world, it is an accepted practice for your GP to refer you to a specialist when you present with a condition that requires treatment greater than which they can provide. Did you know that it is no different in the veterinary world?

Dr Helen Milner, a Registered Specialist in Small Animal Surgery, would like more cat and dog parents to know of their specialist options. She operates a referral service in her field which includes coaching services for veterinary practices around New Zealand.

Taking the road to becoming a registered specialist is a long one which requires commitment and passion. As Helen explains, all veterinarians complete a demanding five-year degree. If they wish to specialise in any field of veterinary medicine, they must then



complete more supervised training which typically involves another three-to-four years of work and study followed by the requirement to pass examinations that evaluate their skill and knowledge in their chosen field.

Understandably, not everyone chooses to pursue specialist registration due to the extra demand this creates on time, work and family commitments, and personal expenses.

Helen remembers that when she chose to pursue her passion of small animal surgery, she was earning less per year than recent veterinary graduates. "A stipend from a university will never compete with a full-time clinical salary but I was not driven by money; I was driven by wanting to be the best I could be for the animals under my care." After Christchurch's earthquakes and a change in circumstance when her specialist practice was sold and then eventually closed by its new owners, she opened her consulting practice servicing veterinary clinics in New Zealand and Australia (www.milnerconsulting.co.nz).

"'Specialist' is a term that warrants protection because any veterinarian saying they are a specialist should have attained their Fellowship (Australasia) or Diplomate (European or American) credentials", says Helen. Specialist areas are wide and varied and, in the small animal field, include oncology, dermatology, surgery, anaesthesiology, ophthalmology, internal medicine, and others.

In a changing world, veterinary medicine has also been changing. Back in July 2017, I wrote about the trend for corporatisation of practices and franchising. Change has continued since then. "Younger veterinarians have been trained in a system that increasingly acknowledges the importance of referral and they are more likely to refer, which is a good thing", says Helen. "Similarly, pet insurance uptake has helped empower pet owners to look at their referral options. Financial limitations are something that we, as specialists, are understandably but regularly presented with. This can limit our abilities to proceed with what we consider to be the best evidenced-based care for our patients and this can be truly heart-breaking for everyone concerned." For example, a specialist surgery such as a tibial plateau levelling osteotomy for cruciate ligament rupture is likely to cost in the region of \$8,000-\$12,000.

Asking your veterinarian for a referral is not something to be feared and, as Helen explains, it creates a collaborative team of three (you, your vet, and your specialist) all working together with one common aim: to optimise the health and welfare of the pet. A specialist will always report back to the referring veterinarian and, in the process, there is increased understanding of the specialist's approach.

If your pet has a condition that warrants additional expertise, talk with your vet about your referral options. A list of existing specialists can be found on the New Zealand Veterinary Council's website www.vetcouncil.org.nz under the 'Find a Specialist' drop-down menu. Many specialists can consult remotely with your veterinarian if in-person specialist coverage is not available in your area of the country. 🐾