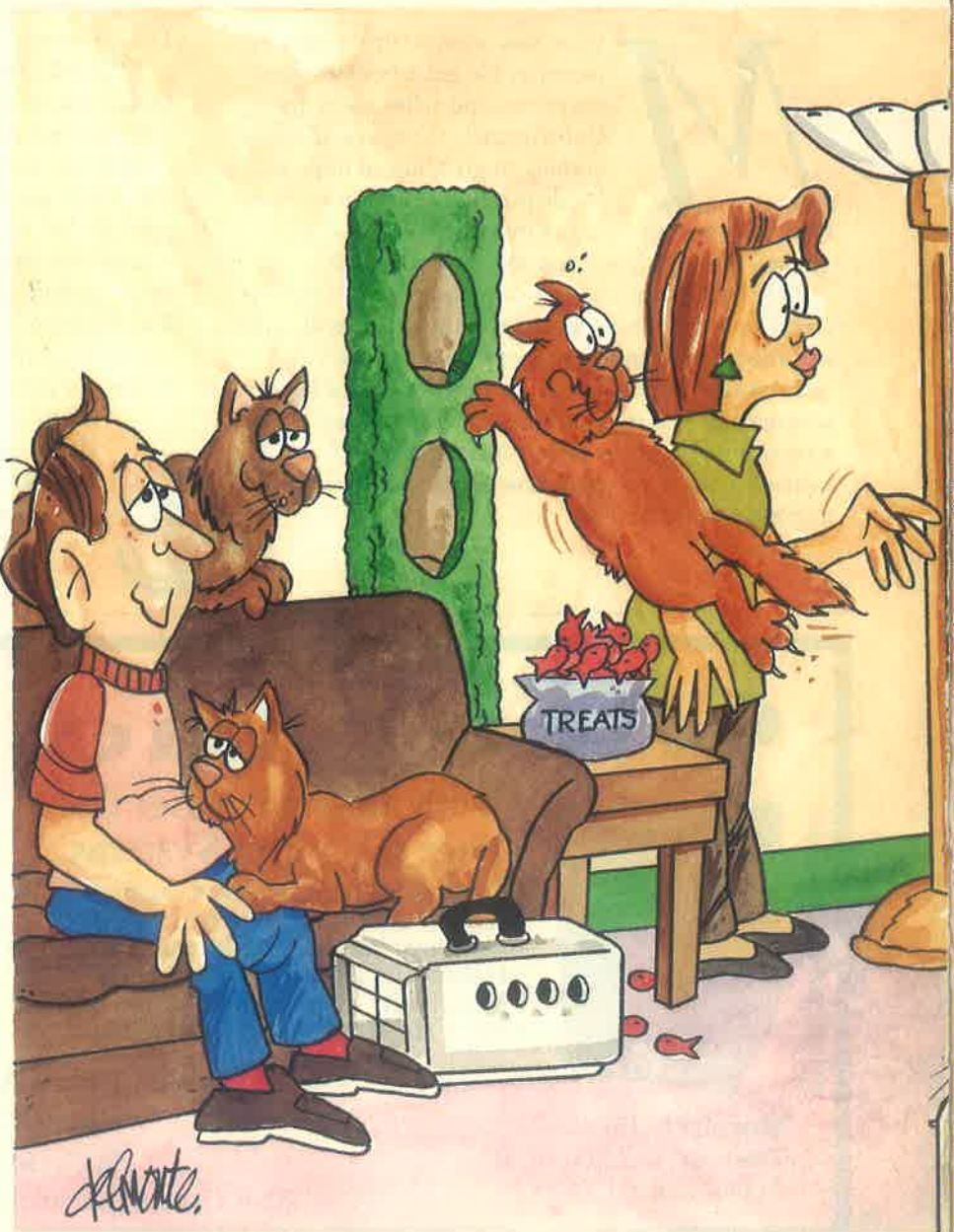


CATS-ONLY CLINICS: BETTER FOR YOUR CAT?

by Debbie Feldman

Illustration by Steve Delmonte

To your cat, a ride in the car usually means one thing — a trip to the veterinarian. Upon arrival, he smells something that makes him even more nervous — dogs! The waiting room is full of them, some straining on leashes, others jumping onto their owners' laps. Still others are running around sniffing, chewing and urinating on the floor. Kitty hears barking from the back of the office and he's terrified. Even in his cat carrier, he doesn't feel safe. He feels trapped, unable to get away from the howling hounds.



But walk into a feline medical practice and the first thing you notice is the absence of barking, panting, snorting and sniffing. Chances are kitty notices, too.

In a traditional small animal clinic, your cat may not get the reassurance that the veterinarian really likes him. When kitty's hair stands on end, the veterinarian backs off and doesn't touch him. Perhaps the doctor is afraid. Would he rather be petting a dog? Doesn't he understand how scared kitty is?

Take your cat to a feline practitioner, though, and chances are

the veterinarian does appreciate how kitty feels. Feline practitioners know all about cats and how they behave because their practices are limited to cats.

The first feline practitioners set up their clinics more than 20 years ago when a group of veterinarians who liked working with cats and believed they were unique enough to warrant their own doctors formed the American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP). Of the association's approximately 1,500 members, about one-sixth treat only cats. The rest are interested in feline medicine but do not

operate strictly feline practices.

AAFP members can keep up with advances in their field by attending annual AAFP-sponsored continuing education seminars in feline medicine and surgery. In addition to coordinating such seminars, the AAFP works with Cornell University's Feline Health Center to offer summer workshops. And there is now an Academy of Feline Medicine that holds a one-day seminar in conjunction with those of the AAFP.

Pet Of Choice

In the late 1980s, cats surpassed dogs in popularity as America's pet of choice. According to the American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA), Americans now keep roughly 60 million pet cats, compared to 52 million or so dogs. Many of these cat owners want the best quality care for their pets.

"As the public's opinion of cats has changed, and people started taking better care of their cats and demanding better veterinary services, veterinarians who always wanted to work with cats have finally been given the opportunity," says Cindy Grove, DVM and owner of The Cat Clinic in Knoxville, Tennessee. "I think I was fortunate to come along at the right time."

Barbara Stein, DVM and owner of The Chicago Cat Clinic, agrees. "Because cat owners have an increased awareness of the medical care now available for cats, they expect and demand it, and if somebody doesn't provide it, they will go elsewhere."

Feline Exclusivity

What's so special about feline practitioners? For one thing, they like cats and devote their practices to dealing exclusively with them. Feline practitioners have usually completed more continuing education in feline medicine than have veterinarians who work in mixed, small animal practices. According to Thomas Elston, DVM, AAFP

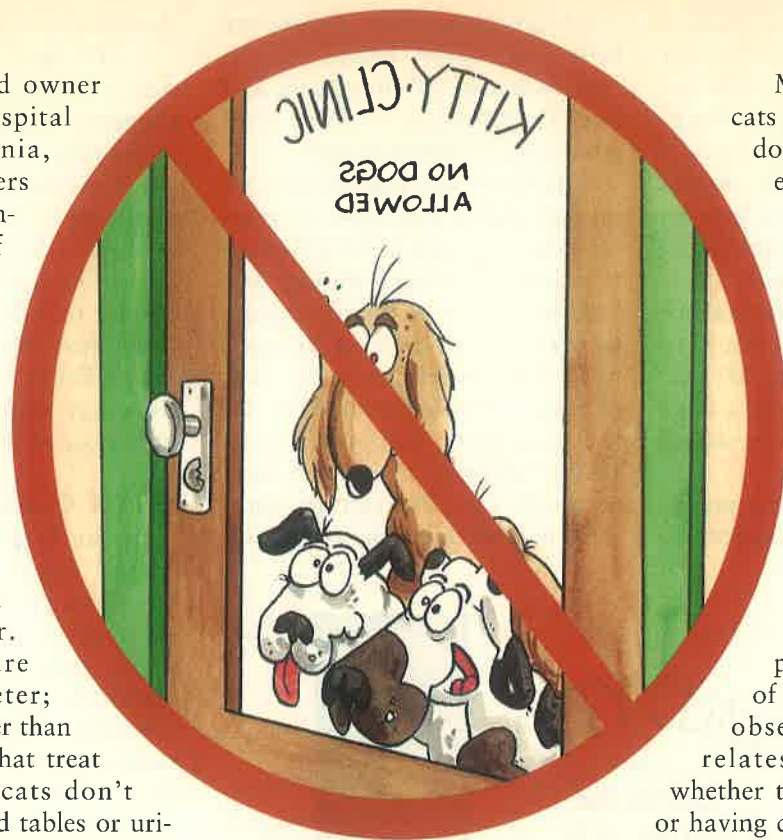


president-elect and owner of T.H.E. Cat Hospital in Irvine, California, "Feline practitioners have spent a tremendous amount of time going to continuing education meetings in feline medicine, honing their skills and finding out everything they can about cats."

There are definite advantages to taking kitty to a feline practitioner. Waiting rooms are cleaner and quieter; they also smell better than those in practices that treat dogs. And, since cats don't tend to chew on end tables or urinate on floors, waiting rooms can be decorated with carpet and upholstered furniture. This makes the experience more pleasant for pet owners, and if an owner is happy, it's bound to affect kitty.

Examination rooms in a feline practice are geared toward making cats comfortable. Exam tables don't have to be cold stainless steel, and bathing facilities don't need to be as large as they would be if they were also used for dogs.

Drop off and pick up are also easier at a feline practice, enabling an office to accommodate a variety of owner lifestyles. Susan McDonough, VMD, owner of The Cat Hospital of Philadelphia, has been in practice 20 years. "Cats lend themselves to being dropped off in carriers, picked up in carriers and sent home by cab if necessary," she says. "We have clients we've never seen, shut-ins whose neighbors bring in their cats. We know them from our phone conversations and we know their cats well. Discussion of their cats' veterinary care is conducted entirely by phone, fax or messenger."



**THE FACT
THAT FELINE
MEDICINE
IS VERY
DIFFERENT
FROM CANINE
MEDICINE IS
BECOMING
MORE WIDELY
ACCEPTED.**

Most important, when cats can't see, smell or hear dogs, they tend to experience less stress. "I think especially when cats have to be hospitalized for surgery or illness, it is less stressful for them not to have dogs nearby," says Dr. Stein.

Feline practitioners know how important cats are to their owners and they listen to their concerns. "Most feline practitioners give a lot of credence to an owner's observations," Dr. Stein relates. "You ask them whether the cat's been coughing or having diarrhea, and there may be a 'no' to every question, but they know their animals so well they know something isn't right."

To compound matters, cats often don't show they're ill until they're very sick. A cat is more likely to go hide in a corner. "Often by the time an owner, even a very observant owner, realizes the animal is sick, the cat is sick enough to need immediate treatment and intensive care," explains Dr. Stein. "So we always tell new clients that any time there is a change in their cat's behavior, it's worth a call. I'd rather see 100 cats that didn't have to be seen than one cat that should have been seen earlier and wasn't."

The Small Dog Theory

For many years, one roadblock to understanding cats that pervaded the veterinary profession was the notion that, medically, cats were just small dogs. "When I was in veterinary school, the emphasis was on dogs," says Dr. Elston, who graduated in 1976. "Actually, there was very little known about cats. Veterinary medicine was just starting to deal

with the feline leukemia virus, heart disease in cats was just beginning to be described and the problem of urinary obstruction was in the early stages of study.”

“In the early 1970s, I was frustrated when all they talked about in school was dogs, dogs, dogs. I would raise my hand and say, ‘Well, what about cats?’ They would say, ‘The same is probably true in a cat,’” says Dr. Stein, a co-founder of AAFP. “There was a dearth of knowledge about cat medicine, and students weren’t given a lot of information. We were told that if cats had certain problems, like convulsions or epilepsy or diabetes, they probably wouldn’t survive.”

It is now known that feline medicine differs greatly from canine medicine. Many diseases — such as feline leukemia, feline AIDS and infectious peritonitis — are unique to cats. Some diseases that afflict both cats and dogs, like diabetes, are handled one way with dogs, another with cats. “Cats react to the same drugs differently than dogs, flea control is different with cats because they’re much more sensitive to insecticides, and cats are more prone to develop illness as a result of stress,” explains Dr. Grove. In addition, treatment for certain types of heart diseases varies for cats and dogs.

No Guarantees

While the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) does not yet officially recognize a feline medicine “specialty” and considers feline medicine more of a special interest, things are changing. In 1995 the first specialty board exams will be offered by the American Board of Veterinary Practitioners (ABVP). To be eligible to become ABVP certified in the feline medicine subspecialty, the veterinarian must prepare two papers demonstrating the methods used to treat difficult feline med-

ical cases and pass the board exams. The veterinarian is then considered a diplomate of the ABVP and a feline specialist.

Will a feline practitioner give your cat better veterinary care? Just because a veterinarian is a cat practitioner doesn’t guarantee medical competence or that he or she was well trained, although it is probably an indication that your cat will receive good care. Likewise, “A lot of small animal practitioners do a fantastic job on cats,” Dr. McDonough says. “A cats-only practice has some things to offer that may make you glad you went there, but, as far as medical competence, if a veterinarian has a very busy practice and sees a lot of cats, your cat will probably be fine.”

How do you choose a veterinarian? The same way you choose

a doctor for yourself — you shop around. Look for a veterinarian you and your cat feel at ease with, one who deals gently and confidently with your cat, particularly if it is easily stressed out when visiting a clinic. “People should trust their feelings,” says Dr. Stein. “I think most people know instantly, in the first five minutes when a veterinarian handles their cat, whether that veterinarian is comfortable with cats.”

When in the market for a veterinarian, don’t wait until your pet is sick. Take your cat in for a nonmedical procedure like a nail trim, so you can check out the veterinarian, facility and staff. If you want to find out which doctors at a particular small animal practice enjoy treating cats, call the office and ask the receptionist. “Almost 100 percent of the time you will get a veterinarian who likes cats,” says Dr. Stein.

When interviewing potential veterinarians, ask whether they are members of the Academy of Feline Medicine. One who is a member of the Academy or AAFP is likely to be more interested in treating cats. If you decide you want to find a feline practitioner, look through the Yellow Pages, or send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to the AAFP requesting a list of members in your geographic area and information as to whether they are in the 200-plus group who limit their practices to cats.

When you locate a veterinarian who seems to appreciate cats, you are well on your way to finding the right doctor for kitty. And if he or she is competent as well, you and your cat will have the best of both worlds. **C**

For information about cats-only clinics in your area contact: Kristi Thomson, Executive Director, American Association of Feline Practitioners, 7007 Wyoming NE, #E-1, Albuquerque NM 87109, 505/828-1100.

A SAMPLING OF THE COUNTRY'S OLDEST FELINE PRACTICES:

Mike McMenomy, DVM
Kitty Klinik
Minneapolis MN
Established 1970

Jay Luger, DVM
Forest Hills Cat Hospital
Forest Hills NY
Established 1974

Susan MacDonough, VMD
The Cat Hospital of
Philadelphia
Philadelphia PA
Established 1974

Barbara Stein, DVM
The Chicago Cat Clinic
Chicago IL
Established 1975

Caroline Engle, DVM
Feline Medical Clinic
Vancouver WA
Established 1977



Chicago Cat Clinic 5301 West Devon Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 60646, (312) 631-5300

December 14, 1994

Ms. Debbie Feldman
1228 Chelsea Rd.
Knoxville, TN 37922

Dear Ms. Feldman,

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your wonderful article in the January issue of CATS magazine.

This is one of the few times I have been accurately quoted and I wish to commend you for that.

The article is well-written and informative and I intend to have copies placed in my waiting room for my clients to read.

Again, thank you for a lovely article.

Sincerely,

Barbara S. Stein DVM
Barbara S. Stein, D.V.M.

BSS/pm