

Student Experience a Primary Reason for New Chicago Clinic

By Herb Whiteley

In April or May the primary care clinic that is part of our new Chicago Center for Veterinary Medicine, at 2242 West Harrison in the Illinois Medical District, will begin seeing patients. The clinic won't truly fulfill its purpose, however, until the first veterinary students arrive in June for two-week rotations.

The student experience has been a central factor in establishing the clinic. To prepare students well for careers as small animal practitioners, we need to engage them in both the clinical and the business aspects of a busy primary care practice.

Increasing clinical exposure has been the goal of many recent changes to the curriculum. Students now can arrange for-credit rotations in primary care private practices. And the new Illinois Integrated Veterinary Professional Curriculum will give students an additional 16 weeks in the Veterinary Teaching Hospital over the course of the four-year degree program.

But unlike these other settings, the Chicago clinic will allow us to give students an educational experience in all aspects of a progressive, high-quality, primary care practice.

“Students need to be in an environment working with real general practitioners, as opposed to academicians or specialists, to get a more realistic view of what they'll be doing in practice,” says Dr. Tom Graves, associate professor of small animal medicine and director of curriculum and instruction in the clinical medicine department.

He mentions several ways students might be engaged, depending on their abilities and interests:

- Shadow a veterinarian
- Conduct a physical examination
- Assist with basic surgical procedures
- Carry out in-house laboratory tests
- Dispense medications
- Communicate with clients about primary care issues and build relationships with clients

Eventually Dr. Graves would like to see a rotation in Chicago that focuses on practice management, covering such activities as inventory management, scheduling, and personnel issues.

As the new veterinary curriculum is implemented across all four years of study in the coming years, there will be opportunities for students in the second, third, and fourth years of the program to participate in the Chicago clinic. Because there may be a great deal of variation in students' background and training, the educational experience has to be flexible and suited to the needs of a given student.

Dr. Rosemary LoGiudice, interim director of the Chicago Center, explains that her philosophy is very heavily oriented toward mentoring and tailoring the educational experience to the student.

"We'll ask students what they perceive as their strengths and weaknesses," says Dr. LoGiudice. "In the first week of their rotation, students will shadow a clinician. In the second week they'll gain hands-on experience with procedures as appropriate."

She feels instilling good client communication skills will be as important as improving proficiency in day-to-day clinical care.

"Client relations make or break a practice," says Dr. LoGiudice. "Students need to understand that the client has a choice whether to use our service.

"Clients need to feel thrilled to come into your practice and to feel that you believe their animal is the most important animal you are working on. They should be eager to pay you for your service and eager to come back."

If you have any questions about the Chicago Center, feel free to contact me at dean@vetmed.illinois.edu or check our Web site: vetmed.illinois.edu/chicago/.