Animal Medical Caretakers

Veterinarians

If we had looked into what it takes to become a veterinarian and what veterinarians actually do, we might have been surprised. We probably knew that the veterinarian knew how to diagnose and treat sick and injured animals, but we may not have known just how much education was required to earn a doctor of veterinary medicine (DVM) degree.

Education for Becoming a Veterinarian

Currently in the United States, a DVM can be earned about thirty accredited colleges. Just to qualify for admission to a school of veterinary medicine, you must have taken at least three years of "privet" courses and have a college degree. You should also have a solid background in social sciences, language skills, mathematics, humanities, chemistry, biology, and physics. However, since each of the accredited veterinary colleges has different admission requirements, you should check the school of your choice and take the undergraduate courses required for that particular program.

As a student of veterinary medicine, you will initially be taking anatomy, physiology, pathology, pharmacology, and microbiology. At this stage, your education is mostly theoretical, although there also will be some laboratory work.

Later your work will be involved more with clinical and surgical training, working with animals and their owners. As might be expected, the emphasis in this stage will be on applied anatomy, diseases, obstetrics, and radiology. Public health, preventive medicine, and nutrition are dealt with at this point in your education, as well as professional ethics and business practices.

After all these hours of study and years of training, the veterinary graduate must still get a state license before going into practice. Veterinarians also must keep up with every new scientific discovery and technological advance throughout their careers.

Career Paths for Veterinarians

The great majority of veterinarians (about seventy-five per cent) in this country work in private practice, and most of them work only on small animals, usually cats and dogs. A much smaller number work with larger animals, such as horses or farm animals; some work with both pets and livestock. All told, veterinarians look after the health of literally millions of animals per year.

Of the veterinarians who do not go into private practice, some become researchers or teachers. Others may find a career with a state or federal agency as regulatory agents, inspectors, disease control specialists, animal control workers, epidemiologists, or environmental workers.

Veterinarians who choose to educate the next generation of veterinarians are also encouraged to publish articles in professional journals and are involved in helping practicing veterinarians continue their education by teaching new techniques and methods.

Veterinarians who specialize in research can be found not only at the university, but also in private industry and government agencies. These veterinarians seek new ways to prevent health problems in animals, and in the process sometimes discover new ways to treat humans, too.

Veterinarians who choose to go into regulatory work are charged with the responsibility of controlling livestock diseases and making sure that those diseases do not affect the public. Those who work for the U.S. Department of Agriculture or state or local government agencies also have to inspect and sometimes quarantine animals that are brought into the country or across state lines.

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Veterinarians in public health work for federal, state, or local governments, which give them a wide variety of positions. As epidemiologists, they investigate outbreaks of diseases. Others work in the larger realm of the environment where they check water supplies or food processing plants for safety. They could also study the impact of pesticides and pollutants on the environment. In the laboratory, veterinarians work on immunization and quarantine programs.

As a veterinarian in the military services, you would probably be in the U.S. Army Veterinary Corps, a branch of the Army Medical Department. Under the umbrella of biomedical research and development, Army veterinarians are engaged in laboratory animal medicine, pathology, food hygiene, and preventive medicine, as well as providing regular veterinary services to Army animals.

The private sector employs veterinarians in research and development in such fields as pharmacology, parasitology, microbiology, and endocrinology, primarily for new product development. Some veterinarians work their way up to positions in production and quality control, marketing, sales, or even management. Companies in the food industry, agri-business, and pharmaceuticals also are possibilities for employment.

Basically, wherever animals are, there also are veterinarians- in neighborhood animal hospitals, in shelters, in zoos and aquariums, at racetracks, and in wildlife management facilities. No matter where they work, veterinarians must like and respect animals and also be able to work well with people, very often under stressful circumstances.

Making a Living as a Veterinarian

According to your choice of veterinary work, your working conditions will vary. In private practice, universities, laboratories, and offices, you will generally work regular hours with a steady income and good benefits. However, if you work with livestock or horses, you may be working outdoors in all kinds of weather. Hours can be long and irregular and the work can be hazardous.

Although veterinarians' incomes also vary according to background, experience, and specialization, as a new graduate you can expect to start at about $15,000-$25,000 per year after graduation. As you gain experience, your salary in government, private industry, colleges, or the military can reach from $35,000 to $65,000 per year.

The future prospects for employment as a veterinarian seem to be quite good, especially for those with training in specialties such as toxicology, environmental or space medicine, and disease control.

Veterinary Technician

Working alongside the veterinarian is the veterinary technician, a comparatively new position in animal care. Because of increased demands on the veterinarian, more and more animals are receiving the specialized training of the technician. Although duties may vary from practice to practice, the primary responsibilities of a veterinary technician usually include recording information about patients, preparing patients and equipment for surgery, collecting specimens, performing specific laboratory and first-aid procedures, treating wounds, and dealing with patients' owners. All of this work is done under the direct supervision of the veterinarian, scientist, or senior technician.

Education for Becoming a Veterinary Technician

You can begin preparing for a career in veterinary technology early. Most veterinary technician programs require a high school diploma or its equivalent and often successful completion of specific courses in high school for admission. Therefore, you may want to talk to your career counselor for help in finding the admission requirements for the programs that suit you best. Most will require a rather strong background in science in either high school or college.

The next step in becoming a veterinary technician is to attend one of the programs of the forty-eight fully accredited colleges of veterinary technology. Required coursework will usually include chemistry, mathematics, humanities, communication skills, and biology. In addition, more specialized coursework will be offered, such as ethics, physiology, anatomy, biochemistry, nutrition, and parasitology. At the end of

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two years of study, you will receive an associate in applied science or similar degree. Many accredited schools suggest that you use the summer break for obtaining practical job-related experience at a clinic or shelter.

After you receive your degree as a veterinary technician, you may have to become registered or certified by the state in which you will practice. Registration requirements vary from state to state. The American Veterinary Medical Association provides a synopsis of these regulations and the American Association of Laboratory Animal Science handles examination and registration procedures for veterinary technicians specializing in laboratory animals.

Once you are on the job, in addition to the required technical skills, you will need a large dose of patience, empathy, and understanding as you treat sick and injured animals and deal with their owners, who are also under stress. The scope of your responsibilities will depend on the veterinarian for whom you work and the type of facility where you work. These facilities include clinics, shelters, zoos, horse farms, racetracks, kennels, laboratories, and even meat-packing facilities. In laboratories you may be expected to feed and care for the animals, maintain the equipment, inspect the carcasses, and keep records.

Making a Living as a Veterinary Technician

Currently, the annual starting salary for degreed technicians is from about $10,000 to $16,000 per year. More experienced graduates' salaries range from about $12,000 to $24,000 per year. Depending on where you work, benefits might include social security, health insurance, paid vacation, and retirement programs. Your promotions within the field will be based largely on performance, attitude, anticipation of veterinarians’ needs, and initiative.

Professional associations make it possible for veterinary technicians to continue their education and to network with others in the field, either at social events or in a professional setting. The national professional organization in this field is the North American Veterinary Technician Association, but the American Veterinary Medical Association also provides lists of local and state organizations for veterinary technicians.

Animal Care Attendant

If you have a real commitment to the everyday care, feeding, and cleaning of animals, you may choose to become a full- or part-time animal care attendant. Grooming and exercising animals are included in this job, as well as cleaning cages. These duties are performed in animal shelters and hospitals, kennels, stables, grooming shops, zoos, and aquariums. You might even work with an ambulance crew or as an overnight shelter attendant. You may be called on to keep basic records and, in some cases, to do some manual labor, such as basic carpentry, painting, lawn maintenance, or digging graves for deceased animals.

If you are looking for a glamour job in animal work, this one is probably not for you. As an attendant, your work involves hard, often dirty, often repetitious, but absolutely necessary work. Working closely with the animals, you will get to know their personalities, temperaments, and needs firsthand. Your rewards are largely intangible, but you will have the joy of experiencing the positive responses of a recovering or lonely animal as it is emotionally or physically healing from injury or disease.

Jobs for Animal Care Attendants

Working as an animal care attendant in a stable you would be responsible for cleaning out the barns or stalls, feeding the horses, brushing them, and trimming their manes and tails. Then you may have to harness and saddle the horses, rub them down, exercise them, and cool them down.

Horse attendants also clean the tack room and polish the saddles. Feed bags and other supplies for the stable may be heavy, but you may be called on to unload them when they are delivered.

In a shelter, either private or public, your responsibilities as an animal care attendant would be different from those in the stable. Basic
Cleaning, grooming, and feeding are the same. At a shelter, however, you may also keep records and screen potential adopters. Sometimes shelter attendants also serve as animal control officers who pick up stray animals and rescue animals that are trapped or otherwise impaired. Attendants may also field calls concerning potential abuse or cruelty toward animals. Many shelters now use attendants as adoption counselors to people who have never owned a pet. Since the attendants know the adoptive pets so well, they are able to match them up with their new owners.

In a veterinary hospital or clinic, animal care attendants perform the basic daily duties for the well-being of the animals. In addition, they may help prepare equipment and instruments for surgery or help hold the animals while they are being treated by the veterinarian. All instructions given by the veterinarian regarding diet and care of the sick or injured animal have to be followed precisely by the animal care attendant. The attendant in a hospital may also be called on to communicate with the pets’ owners and perform some clerical duties, such as answering telephones, keeping records, and making appointments.

If you work as an attendant in a laboratory, you may have to keep records on experiments, observe effects of drugs or medication on the animals, assist in the preparation of special diets or nutritional needs of the animals, and take care of recovering animals.

You should keep in mind that some of the animals in your care may die, and for someone who has cared for an animal, death can be a traumatic experience. Before becoming an animal care attendant, you should think about whether you can deal with the reality of pain and death of animals you love.

Animal Care Attendant

Since there are no educational or training requirements for the animal care attendant, many people come to this job as volunteers and work up to a staff position. As a volunteer, you will get the opportunity to see whether you have what it takes to be an attendant. You should also think about which area of caretaking you would feel most comfortable in—the hospital, shelter, stable, laboratory, or aquarium.

If you are still in school and are contemplating working as an attendant, you should take English, mathematics, and social studies. Additionally, biology, chemistry, science, physiology, or psychology would be helpful. Any courses in animal behavior and business administration are a bonus.

There is a rather high turnover rate among animal care attendants so employment opportunities are good. Also, people are demanding better care of their animals. Salaries, however, are generally poor. The work is steady, though, because animals often need round-the-clock attention and you cannot always leave work at five P.M. Benefits usually include paid vacation, health and life insurance, a pension plan, and sick days.

If you are already working but are thinking about changing your career to animal work, you might want to work as a volunteer at an animal hospital, kennel, shelter, or training facility. Remember that your physical strength, emotional sensitivity, ability to deal with difficult situations, patience, and thoroughness are valuable qualities to bring to any work with animals. They are especially valuable, however, for those whose jobs require daily physical contact with pets, livestock, or wildlife.

Pet Therapist

A fairly new career opportunity for animal caretakers is that of pet therapist or psychologist. At present, there are no specific qualifications or educational paths that are required, but as the field grows, standards will be imposed and professional organizations will probably be founded. For now, however, it could be called an open field for career possibilities. Although therapists usually specialize in companion animals, there will probably be room for therapists in wildlife management and farm animals as more is learned about animal behavior.

One of the earliest pioneers in the field of pet therapy is Carole Wilbourn who operates out of a veterinary center in New York City. She specializes in feline behavioral disorders, devising total therapeutic programs for emotionally based problems that may lead to physiological disorders. Carole also writes a monthly column for Cat Fancy magazine called “Cats on the Couch” and has written several
Carole majored in psychology in college and went on to work with various organizations and individuals with cat problems. She then founded a veterinary hospital that dealt exclusively with cats.

Like humans, cats can become chronically anxious because of stress. This emotional problem can eventually lead to physiological illness. Cat therapists should be familiar with feline anatomy and behavioral patterns and messages. They should also be sensitive to both animal and owner in determining what therapeutic course to take.

Cats experience stress, grief, happiness, and sadness, and may express these emotions in antisocial behavior, damage to property, or not using the litter pan. Part of the therapy may be accompanied by tapes of “New Age” music. Played back later at home, these tapes can help the cat recapture peaceful feelings experienced in therapy.

Cats are currently considered the most popular companion animal, partially because they are more self-sufficient than dogs. They are perfect pets for working people, apartment dwellers, and single people. As the number of cat owners continues to grow, so probably will the need for pet therapists. You must have a genuine concern and sensitivity for animals if you want to enter this field. A background in psychology or animal behavior would be extremely helpful. As the field expands, training in animal husbandry, wildlife management, and biology may also be required.

The pioneer work being done by pet therapists now may also serve as the basis for further research and treatment for farm and other animals. Your imagination and creativity in this new field may come into play, as well as your technical skills and empathy and compassion.

Animal Caretakers Are Important to Everyone

You might ask yourself why there is such a wide range of work available for those who choose to be animal caretakers. From the most highly skilled professional—the veterinarian—to the kennel attendant, animal caretakers play a vital role in the life of our society. Healthy, loving companion animals bring a great deal of joy to their human owners and provide lifelong companionship. They have been known to help sick people get better and older people feel young again. Having a pet in your life is a privilege and offers all of us a daily glimpse into the life and behavior of another species.

Companion animals are becoming more popular with people who live in small city apartments, and no longer belong only to suburban families with backyards or wide open spaces. With the demands and dangers of city life and with more owners working outside the home for longer hours, the pet may need special psychological help to cope with the anxieties associated with new experiences.

Animals in zoos and aquariums also need proper nutrition, a compatible habitat, and proper medical attention. The same applies to wild animals. Since the natural habitats of these animals have been destroyed in many parts of the world, one of the main functions of zoos, aquariums, and wildlife management facilities is to provide the animals with the kind of environment and food that is conducive to their health and well-being, as well as their propagation.

Captive wild animals provide humans with a look at species that would otherwise not be available, which should lead to understanding and respect for other species. Because of the size of these facilities and of the animals themselves, many caretakers are needed for their welfare—veterinarians, attendants, technicians, nutritionists, and biologists.

Colleges and universities specializing in veterinary medicine rely on other veterinarians to teach, publish, consult, and perform research. An ability to transmit ideas and to evaluate progress of the students is needed in this career, in addition to a thorough knowledge of veterinary medicine. Without the teachers to guide the next generation of caretakers, whole generations of animals might be lost due to injury, neglect, disease, and overpopulation.
Without veterinarians in regulatory work, diseases could spread rapidly from animals to humans, especially if the animals have come into the country from other parts of the world. So the veterinarian in regulatory work is very much concerned with the health and well-being of humans, if only indirectly.

Of course, diseases are more often transmitted from animal to animal, and that's why animal epidemiologists are important. Tracing the origin of the disease and finding a cure will help preserve the species involved, as well as the lives of the afflicted animals.

Pollution affects both humans and animals in many ways every day. Our water supply and air quality are crucial to sustain all forms of life, as well as to ensure future generations. Pesticides affect the food chain for all land creatures, and sea animals are just as affected by oil spills as we are. Veterinarians who specialize in environmental hazards for animals will again indirectly aid human preservation.

Animals used for sport, such as race horses, need excellent daily care and nutrition if they are to perform to their full potential. Many caretakers are necessary to maintain these sleek animals' well-being. And when they take off from the starting gate, it's easy to see why they are so cherished.

Animal caretakers, then, are necessary to preserve the health of individual animals as well as that of the species. Indirectly, they also help to preserve the welfare of humans by helping to preserve the vital ecological balance between and among the many species on the planet.

Where Do Animal Caretakers Work?

Once you have decided that you want to become part of that link between healthy and cared-for animals and the people who rely on them for beauty, pleasure, joy, and companionship, you will want to take a look at the possible places where you might be employed in your new career.

Here is where you can work as a veterinarian: in private practice, in hospitals and clinics, in zoological parks in aquariums, in private and public shelters for regulatory agencies at racetracks for environmental organizations, in wildlife management facilities at universities and colleges, in laboratories in the military service, and in food-processing plants at pharmaceutical companies at horse farms and stables in kennels.

Here is where you can work as a veterinary technician: in private practice, in hospitals and clinics, in zoological parks, in aquariums, in private and public shelters at racetracks, in wildlife management facilities, and in the military service at horse farms and stables in kennels.

Here is where you can work as an animal attendant: in hospitals and clinics, in zoological parks, in private and public shelters, in wildlife management facilities, in laboratories, in the military service, in horse farms and stables in kennels.

Here is where you can work as a pet therapist: in private practice, in owners' homes, in hospitals and clinics, in classrooms, and on a magazine staff in a shelter.

The Next Step

Now you know which caretaker careers are available and how to prepare for them. You also know why these careers are so important to the physical and emotional welfare of animals, and indirectly, of humans. And you now know a little bit about where you would be working as a caretaker.

The next step is to do a little more research to be sure that you're on the right track. Volunteer at your local shelter or clinic. Contact your local animal hospital and see if a veterinarian or veterinary technician would talk to you about their job. Or maybe you could work part
time as an animal attendant. You can read every article there is on pet therapy or specialized books from your community library. Don’t be afraid to plunge in and ask, read, and research. There is a lot of work to be done and caretakers are usually willing to talk about their work. They are, after all, hard-working professionals who are proud of their work and want to share their information with interested people. And remember-the sooner you start, the sooner you’ll be working with the animals you love!