

## Number of animal vet specialists on the rise

By Adam Foxman

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When Karen VeLonda spent nearly two years saving for her Chihuahua mix's cataract surgery, friends and relatives told her she was nuts.

But to VeLonda, 2½-year-old Ramona is family, so she felt she had a responsibility to get the best care possible when the little dog was losing her vision.

"When I decided to keep her, I made a commitment to her to take care of her as best as I possibly could," the Los Angeles resident said before the surgery at Animal Eye Care Clinics in Camarillo. "She has her whole life ahead of her. Shouldn't she be able to see if she can?"

VeLonda's view of her pet as a family member has become increasingly common, contributing to a tripling of the number of animal-medicine specialists nationwide in the past 25 years.

There were 10,210 veterinary specialist certifications in the United States in 2010, compared with 3,205 in 1987, according to the American Veterinary Medical Association. Some veterinarians have multiple certifications.

The association certifies specialists in areas such as expertise in dogs, cats, birds or reptiles. Other specialists are certified in animal cardiology, dermatology, oncology, ophthalmology, epidemiology and sports medicine. There's even a specialty called theriogenology, the study of animal reproduction.

To be board-certified, aspiring specialists spend two to six years in residency after veterinary school and then must pass rigorous exams, said David Kirkpatrick, an association spokesman.

Ventura County has about 25 veterinary specialists, said Leah Basinai, chief operations officer for the Veterinary Medical and Surgical Group, which runs an animal hospital in Ventura.

The group has grown dramatically since it was founded in 1988 with one surgeon, Basinai said. Its Ventura hospital now has four surgeons, four internal medicine specialists, three emergency and critical care doctors, a radiologist and an oncologist, she said.

Animal Eye Care was founded in 1992. The Camarillo clinic's veterinarians — Jeannette da Silva Curiel and Brian Marchione — are among about 350 board-certified animal ophthalmologists in the nation, according to the association.

The clinic sees thousands of dogs and cats a year, and most of its surgeries are on cataracts, da Silva said. As in human cataract surgeries, animal ophthalmologists break up the patient's lenses with ultrasound, then implant artificial lenses.

The surgeries are more challenging than the human version because the lenses in a dog's eyes often are larger and much harder, da Silva said. Despite the challenge, in carefully selected and properly prepared patients, the procedure has a success rate better than 90 percent, da Silva said.

"It's amazing that we can do this ... that we can take a blind animal and they can see again," she said.

Before Ramona was diagnosed with cataracts, VeLonda didn't know animal ophthalmologists even existed, she said. With just a bit of peripheral vision, Ramona would run into moving objects like VeLonda's legs and wouldn't play with other dogs at the park.

After learning Ramona had cataracts that could be corrected with surgery, VeLonda decided it was the right thing to do, even though she was having trouble paying her rent. Because Ramona's health was otherwise good, VeLonda thought correcting a fixable problem was more important than the money, she said.

After a lot of research, VeLonda settled on the Camarillo clinic, where the surgery's roughly \$4,300 cost was less than at some other facilities, she said.

Although she hopes to be at least partially reimbursed by pet insurance, VeLonda knew she'd have to pay for the procedure upfront, so she saved for more than two years. Friends and family gave her "a lot of grief" for spending so much money on the dog when her work as a massage therapist was declining because of a slow economy, but she made it a priority.

"I'm responsible for her," VeLonda said. "She doesn't have thumbs. I'm her sole support."

A few weeks after Ramona's surgery, the results were "pretty amazing," VeLonda said.

"Yesterday she saw some crows and very seriously thought about chasing them," VeLonda said, adding Ramona's not allowed to chase anything during her recovery. "It makes me just tear up a little bit because she was blind and now she can see. ... It just softens my heart."

Along with advances that make the specialty medical care possible, the strong bond between people and pets has helped drive the growth in veterinary specialties, said Emily Patterson-Kane, an animal-welfare scientist with the veterinary association.

Fifty years ago, veterinarians' patients typically were farm animals; now, about 80 percent are pets, Patterson-Kane said.

"We have people talking about their fur kids," she said. "The whole language has changed."



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