



Veterinarian Interns

Veterinarian Interns Provide Valuable Service

by Carol Osman Brown

During the long hours of the night, they often are there to offer a helping hand in a medical emergency. They watch an injured wild animal approach the thin line between life and death, then coax it along the road to recovery. They learn about wildlife medicine from animals that unwittingly help teach important lessons.

These interns, who already have a degree in veterinary medicine, come from Sonora Veterinary Specialist Hospital, where they are doing a one-year internship. After getting their degrees, they participated in a match program to locate animal hospitals and clinics where they could complete their internships. They have come to Sonora Veterinary Specialist Hospital from all over the world to learn about specialty veterinary medicine and wildlife medicine.

The Benefits of the Program

As part of their internship, they provide countless hours of service annually for Southwest Wildlife. Animals in critical condition are often taken directly to the hospital for tests and, sometimes, surgery. The senior doctor may perform surgery with the interns assisting or, depending upon the interns' levels of training and experience, they may even perform part or all of the surgery themselves. Each intern then is responsible for the recovery of that patient until the animal is released from Sonora Veterinary Specialist Hospital and returned to Southwest.

The interns also rotate out to Southwest's 10-acre desert habitat facility to work in the medical care center. There, they follow up on those animals released from the hospital and provide on site medical care for animals.

According to Southwest Wildlife's executive director, Linda Searles, it was often difficult to find information on how to care for certain species—and equally difficult to find veterinary help for the animals—when Southwest was first founded. She explains, "The internship program provides doctors an opportunity to teach wildlife medicine while helping an actual patient. Each intern has an opportunity to learn and the animals have a second chance at life.

"There is no way that a wildlife rehabilitation center could afford to spend hundreds of dollars on patients for orthopedic surgery, critical care, CT scans and other expensive procedures. For example, if a bobcat who has been hit by a car comes in and needs extensive orthopedic surgery, it would be extremely expensive, and

probably cost prohibitive, for us to help him. But due to the internship program, this animal gets a second chance at life. This program has enabled us to turn difficult circumstances into a win-win situation!”

The internship program:

- Exposes young vets to wildlife medicine and the virtues of altruism and compassion.
- Provides direct access to wildlife, thus dispelling myths and fears.
- Provides much-needed veterinary help on-site.
- Teaches new vets that while saving one life may not make a difference to the species, it certainly makes a big difference to that individual animal.
- Allows the animals, throughout the course of treatment and rehabilitation, to give back more in knowledge and direct experience than the interns give in restoring lives.
- Teaches that saving our wildlife, one life at a time, makes a difference and touches many lives.

The Interns’ Perspectives

Dr. Anders Blaabjerg, of Denmark, says, “The first night I was on duty at Sonora, there was a big commotion and someone said they were bringing in a javelina for surgery. I was surprised because I had never heard this word—Javelina—in my medical training. When I saw it, I realized it must be a wild pig. I knew I would be learning many new things here.

“It is a good opportunity to be able to study these unusual animals. Most wild animals react differently to anesthesia and medications than domestic ones. I enjoy getting outside and working with wildlife at Southwest.”

Dr. Rebecca Kagen is from rural Pennsylvania, where she spent a lot of time outside watching the animals in her backyard. “Animals of all types are fascinating and the loss of native wildlife and habitat is unacceptable. So conservation has always been very important to me.”

She came to Sonora because she wanted a chance to work with a pathologist who bases his practice in Sonora’s clinic. Dr. Kagan explains, “Pathology is one of my main interests. I also wanted a year of small animal medicine/surgery to pull together what I learned at school while also doing some exotic species medicine. Sonora offers a ton of surgery opportunities while giving me some time to spend at Southwest Wildlife. For my future career, it is good to spend some time in the field. I learn something about the practical aspects and limitations of disease management in wild animals.

“Wildlife medicine is different from working on pets because you have to really consider how to handle these animals and how your treatment plan can be adapted to work for the animal and its caretaker. For example, you can’t just restrain a cougar for an exam and then prescribe twice daily injections. I have to think about things differently, which is hard, but interesting.” After her internship, she plans to do a residency in zoo and wildlife pathology, as she is especially interested in wildlife disease and public health.

Another intern, Dr. Carrie Velguth, of Washington D.C., has had an interesting career path. After working as a Japanese translator, a journalist covering international conservation issues, and a volunteer at the National Zoo’s hospital in Washington D.C., she decided to become a vet. She chose Sonora for her internship because she likes deserts and it is one of few private practices that offers experience with wildlife.

“An internship is sort of like boot camp—very intense, with long hours. Working at Southwest Wildlife has been the highlight of this year. It has given me a chance to work with a wide variety of animals in a more natural environment. I enjoy the ones that are not glamorous such as bats, toads and Gila Monsters,” confides Dr. Velguth. “My first day at Southwest, I worked on a Giant Colorado River Toad who unfortunately popped up in the middle of the wolf pen. He had a lot of bites and didn’t survive. I also enjoy coyotes and respect them as survivors. It is nice to see a basic canine design that is functionally efficient, in contrast to many domestic dogs that have human-caused health problems due to breeding and diet. I tend to like grumpy animals and I’m in love with javalinas,” she adds.

Her most unusual experience is working with a javelina whose nose keeps falling off. The intern explains, “This

javelina probably ran into a fence because its snout was practically ripped off. The tissue is still alive, but the nose is slipped off to the side. We have re-attached it several times. But once the snout starts healing, she starts trying to root around and knocks it off again. So last time we stapled big metal rings around her nose and put a bucket on her head. She looks like one bad, punk pig.”

Dr. Velguth says, “Linda’s dedication to each animal is remarkable. I really respect her dedication, as well as the opportunity she provides for us to get direct exposure to wildlife.” Eventually this intern wants to work in conservation medicine. “I believe that environmental health, the health of wildlife species and human health, are all linked. Habitat destruction directly affects population health.”

Other interns currently doing rotations at Southwest Wildlife include: Dr. Lisa Thompson of Utah, who plans to volunteer at a wildlife rehab facility near the emergency critical care hospital where she will do her residency; Dr. Tom Chomczynski, who will return to Poland after his internship; Dr. Ayman Wassef, from Egypt; and, from Japan, Dr. Akiko Mitsui.

Director Searles says, “Our hope is that wherever these interns go in life, they will take the knowledge that they gained at Sonora and Southwest to help rehabilitant centers, zoos, and conservation programs in their communities.” Many of them have, including: Dr. Leo Egar, who is the western regional veterinarian for the Humane Society of the U.S. and does mobile spay and neuter clinics in poor rural communities throughout the southwest, recently cared for many animals that survived the Tsunami, including the elephants that broke their chains and ran to the mountains; Dr. Adrienne Leki, who has received a residency in zoo and wildlife medicine; Dr. Lilian Rizzo, who now works at Sonora, where she cares for wild animals and supervises new interns; Dr. Chris Henrich, who volunteers at Southwest occasionally while she does her residency; and Dr. Yael Bar-Shalom who continues to volunteer at Southwest one day each week—on her day off from work as an emergency room vet!

Of course, these opportunities would not be available, to the wildlife of the southwest or the interns, without the invaluable commitment and cooperation of Sonora Veterinary Specialist Hospital. Thanks, Sonora!