

A different kind of pet clinic

Cataracts? Chemo? Veterinary center handles it all

09:38 AM CST on Friday, January 30, 2004

By CHRISTY A. ROBINSON / The Dallas Morning News

Trooper lay on a towel that Peggy and Terry Thomas used to carry him into the office, waiting for a neurologist to explain why he had fallen paralyzed two days before.

The Plano couple rescued the 8-year-old golden retriever two years ago. In the years since, he has repaid them with service as a mascot for the Dallas Fort Worth Metro Golden Retriever Rescue, which the Thomases volunteer for.

"He's like a little person in a fur suit," Mrs. Thomas said.

The Thomases took Trooper to the Veterinary Referral Center of North Texas on Trinity Mills Road in Far North Dallas. The Collin County facility – a collection of specialized clinics – is the only one of its kind in North Texas, seeing animals from West and East Texas and surrounding states. There is a similar referral center in Houston.

Gary Payne / Special Contributor

T.J., a domestic shorthair cat, is anesthetized before receiving a radiation treatment.

From chemotherapy to hip replacements, health care procedures common for their human masters are now becoming more available to pets.

People today want exceptional health care for their pets, said Dr. Joe King, administrator at the referral center.

"Pets aren't just part of the family; they've become the boss," he said.

The center has five specialty clinics: dermatology, diagnostic, ophthalmology, radiology and surgical.

"I think there's little doubt that over five to 10 years, there's been an increase in specialty clinics in the United States," said W. Terry Stiles, interim director of the teaching hospital at Texas A&M University College of Veterinary Medicine. "You see pets in homes who are bit more like children, and families are willing to spend the money necessary to take care of their beloved children."

Each clinic takes patients based on referrals from general-practice veterinarians whose resources may be too limited for a pet's particular medical need.

"The majority of people want the best care they can find," said Dr. King. "And that's what these specialists try to provide."

Intensive care

Magnetic resonance imaging and X-rays are just some of the technology available.

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The diagnostic clinic also has an intensive care unit in case things get urgent.

The cases run far more serious than shots and a checkup. A red Doberman pinscher named Missy recently was under watch in ICU for an autoimmune disorder eating away her toes.

Doctors treated her with immuno-suppressive drugs and tried to re-establish her blood supply, but she had to be euthanized.

That same day a team worked to remove a cyst from underneath a small dog's tongue.

There's also physical therapy.

Millicent, a black Lab mix, ambled on a treadmill in a tank with water up to her elbows during one of her regular sessions. She wore a green life jacket as she gently learned to walk after her December back surgery.

"This type of thing costs money," said Diana Wagener as her puppy, Samson, had his eyes checked.

Samson's exam was \$40, and a full visit can run \$250 to \$300, she said.

Ms. Wagener, who shows collies, said that ophthalmologist Robert Munger has tended her dogs for 15 years and that the quality treatment outweighs the cost.

"If he says what it is during an exam, then that's it," she said.

A white cat lay motionless in a Plexiglas box, and two malamutes were sprawled out on gurneys like giant mounds of fur. They were waiting for their turn on the linear accelerator that would radiate their tumors, and they were soundly anesthetized for the treatment.

Dr. Catherine Lustgarten determines the amount of radiation each animal needs, depending on its particular tumor. The doses are delivered in a laserlike treatment.

"Like a prescription, but a dose of radiation instead of medicine," she said.
Trooper's illness

The surgery clinic's neurosurgeon, Dr. Julie Ducoté, was called to check if Trooper's inability to walk was back-related.

The doctor determined one of two possibilities: Trooper could have a herniated disk, but, more probably, he had a tumor.

A herniated disk could be remedied. A tumor on his spinal cord could not.

Intuition and experience with the breed let the Thomases know the probable outcome, bringing tears.

A myelogram, X-rays, surgery, anesthesia, the hospital stay, blood work and post-op medication would run \$2,300 to \$2,700. Still, the money didn't matter, they said. They would be loyal.

Trooper was euthanized that day.

Mrs. Thomas later said she knew she did everything she could for him.

"I've been to the same facility before, and they're the best," she said. "If you've got a dog in trouble, that's where you go."

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