

A View from the Top

Vet radiology a small but growing field

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By SUSAN KREIMER / Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning News

Veterinary graduates who wish to combine their love of pets, medicine and technology are increasingly specializing in veterinary radiology, a field that is growing as the medical treatment of animals advances.

Dr. Catherine Lustgarten, owner of the Animal Radiology Clinic in Dallas, is one of about 200 specialists nationwide who devote their practices to diagnostic imaging and radiation treatments for pets.

Dr. Lustgarten's practice is part of the Veterinary Referral Center of North Texas, which includes the Animal Dermatology Clinic, Animal Diagnostic Clinic, Animal Ophthalmology Clinic and Dallas Veterinary Surgical Center.

PHOTO

JASON JANIK/Special to DMN

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These board-certified specialists work as extensions of referring veterinarians to provide care for small animals, primarily dogs and cats, that have unusual or challenging injuries, abnormalities or diseases.

More than 18 specialty veterinarians work in these five clinics, along with rotating residents and interns. In Dr. Lustgarten's clinic, two part-time veterinary radiologists perform ultrasounds, interpret radiographs and review digital images from general practitioners across the country.

Although most veterinarians have an X-ray machine, she also offers services such as ultrasound and MRI for a more thorough examination of a pet's organs. It costs from \$1,000 to \$1,500 to do an MRI of one body part, but more people have been willing to pay that in the last decade or two.

"I was always fascinated that you could see inside the body with an X-ray," said Dr. Lustgarten, 55, who founded the clinic in 1980. "And now we just have fancier tools that allow you to see a lot more detail."

One such tool is the gamma camera, which enables the veterinarian to inspect a particular organ with greater scrutiny. The camera detects radioactivity after a specific material is injected into the bloodstream.

The field requires training beyond college and a four-year veterinary medicine program. Dr. Lustgarten completed a three-year residency in veterinary radiology, where she learned to use more sophisticated imaging equipment and administer radiation to pets with cancer.

The nation isn't turning out enough veterinary radiology graduates mostly because of a lack of programs, she said.

"There's no shortage of interest out there," Dr. Lustgarten said.

It takes more than veterinarians and technology to run a successful practice. In addition to a receptionist, Dr. Lustgarten employs three veterinary technicians, one of whom doubles as an office manager.

"They're like a nurse and a lab technician, an X-ray technician, a surgery technician and an orderly – all rolled into one," she said of the technicians.

These people are hard to find. First, there's a shortage of veterinary technicians. Second, technicians who come to work for Dr. Lustgarten usually need on-the-job training because the skills are more specialized than those required in most general practices.

"Just like any other industry, job turnover is costly to the employer," Dr. Lustgarten said. "We try to identify employees who have high ethical standards and have the same respect for animals and their owners that I do."

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