

IT'S CATS-ONLY CARE



Paul Kitagaki Jr. pkitagaki@sacbee.com

Veterinarian Irene Fujishima dispenses a little TLC to 19-year-old Mercedes during the cat's visit to the Sacramento Cat Hospital this week. Michael and Phyllis Robertson of Gold River bring Mercedes to the hospital once a week to flush out the Himalayan cat's one working kidney. Mercedes has been a patient of the cat hospital for 10 years.

More clinics offer exclusive treatment for clients who can be . . . a bit prickly

BY ANNE GONZALES
Bee Correspondent

Cats know they're in a class of their own.

A cadre of cats-only veterinarians and their owners think so, too. They say the furry, purring species is so different from dogs that cats need their own doctors focused on their special needs.

What is a diplomate?

A diplomate is a veterinarian who has completed a residency program or six years of clinical veterinary practice and passed a rigorous two-day written examination.

A cat-only practice is also calming to the pets and the humans around them.

"Cats get stressed out around dogs," Fujishima said. "Some owners put off taking their cat to the vet because of a bad experience. There are no barking

dogs here, and we try to make it as pleasant as possible for the cats and their owners."

Fujishima works at one of the nation's first and oldest cat hospitals, the Sacramento Cat Hospital in Carmichael, founded in 1974. In addition to the more routine services offered by small-animal clinics, the cat hospital gives help with more complex feline cases, including behavioral consultations, pain management, surgery, nutritional counseling, and geriatric and hospice care.

Half of the cats coming to the practice are more than 10 years old, said Billie Bensen Martin, owner of the hospital. She said the more complicated cases involve treatment of diabetes, hyperthyroidism, heart disease, kidney disease and cancer. The office also treats orthopedic and neurologic problems in cats.

Michael and Phyllis Robertson of Gold River bring their 19-year-old cat, Mercedes, to the Sacramento Cat Hospital once a week for a treatment to flush out the Himalayan cat's one working kidney. Mercedes has been a patient of the cat hospital for

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Cat owner Michael Robertson watches as Irene Fujishima, right, and vet tech Sandy Cooper examine Mercedes at the Carmichael cat hospital, which the 19-year-old pet visits once per week.

Vet: Cats' tendency to conceal sickness can be a challenge

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10 years, and Michael Robertson said he's not sure his cat would be around without the attention of a feline-only practice.

"For 19 years old, she's in great shape, but over the years, they've treated her for early stages of kidney failure, asthma and flu," Robertson said. "A couple times, she's been right on the edge."

Elizabeth Colleran, president of the American Board of Feline Practitioners, said cats-only veterinarian offices are in demand by pet owners, creating steady growth of such clinics. Veterinarians who like cats tend to want to specialize in feline medicine, because the animals have "unique characteristics," said Colleran, who runs cat hospitals in Chico and Portland, Ore.

"They have different diseases, nutrition requirements, and pathways than other species," Colleran said of cats. "The medicine has gotten so advanced, and awareness among pet owners has increased."

Cats are genetically programmed to cover up their ailments, Colleran said, which makes it more challenging to diagnose and treat them.

"They're both predator and prey in the wild, and if you're weak or have an injury, that can be a disadvantage," Colleran said. "So they're adept at concealing illnesses. This makes medical testing and complete histories on cats very important."

And then there's the notorious demeanor of the cat.

"You can make dogs do something, by giving them a treat or showing them who's boss," Colleran said. "There's absolutely no submissive behavior in a cat's repertoire. Quitting is not an option for them."

Fujishima likes working

with cats, even when they're "grumpy," she said.

"As patients, I have to figure them out and make a connection with them," she said. "It's something you can't really duplicate with dogs. I get attached to these kitties, even when they're older and they grumble."

Fujishima's journey to feline practitioner was a winding road. She graduated from Yale University in 1994 and was on her way to a career in chemical engineering when she noticed she enjoyed interacting with the lab mice more than euthanizing them during research.

She graduated from the University of California, Davis, veterinary school in 2001 and joined the staff at Sacramento Cat Hospital. Today she is the only Sacramento-area veterinarian certified as a diplomate in feline medicine by the American Board of Veterinary Practitioners.

Fujishima is one of only 12 feline practice diplomates in the state and 79 in the nation.

Diplomates must complete a residency program or six years of clinical veterinary practice, then sit for a rigorous two-day examination.

Colleran hopes to follow in Fujishima's footsteps by sitting for the exam in November.

"It's a way to get well-versed in a single species, so you improve your depth of focus," she said. "It's like the difference between a family physician and a pediatrician."

Sacramento's River City Cat Clinic was the first clinic in the nation devoted exclusively to cats in 1973, and the Sacramento Cat Hospital opened the next year as the second in the country. Today, there are also cat-only practices in Davis, Folsom and Rocklin.