

EXotics EXpert



Marla Lichtenberger, then 25 and in veterinary school in India, cares for a water buffalo suffering from ascites. The animal had eaten a foreign body that pierced the intestines.

By PATRICIA RODRIGUEZ, for Veterinary Practice News

Marla Lichtenberger was 22 and had never been on an airplane when her parents dropped her off at the Milwaukee airport as she headed for veterinary school half a world away.

This was in the late '70s, when female veterinarians were less common. A few years earlier, a high school counselor had flatly told her to pick another career, something more suitable "for a girl." Her home state of Wisconsin had no school of veterinary medicine at the time, and she had not been one of the few out-of-state students granted admission in neighboring Minnesota.

At the suggestion of an Indian-born veterinarian she had worked for, Lichtenberger looked into veterinary schools in India. Soon, she was jetting to Punjab Agricultural University, where, after struggling with malaria and dysentery, strikes that idled classes for months at a time and a rabid water buffalo, she earned her DVM degree in 1985.

"It was quite an adventure," says Lichtenberger, Dipl. ACVECC. "But I would never give up this experience. It made me grow up very fast, and it gave me an incredible background."

For one thing it gave her early interest and experience in working with exotics, which, in turn, has shaped her career. She has done extensive research in exotic care and has spoken widely on the topic. She will host a lecture and lab-

oratory on small mammal emergency medicine in August during the Association of Avian Veterinarians Conference. The meeting is being held in Milwaukee in conjunction with the Association of Exotic Mammal Veterinarians and the Association of Reptilian and Amphibian Veterinarians.

And this month, Lichtenberger opens her own practice, the Milwaukee Emergency Center for Animals, a critical care facility offering 24-hour care to not just dogs and cats but to reptiles, small mammals, birds and other exotics, making sure they get the same specialized care as more commonly seen pets.

"I never wanted to be a zoo veterinarian, because that would not allow me to treat the dogs and cats I love so much," Lichtenberger says. "I wanted every type of exotic to be part of my practice, and opening the emergency center will allow me to do it all."

Separate but Equal

The hospital will include a mostly-glassed exotics intensive care unit inside the small-animal ICU so all the animals can be monitored

constantly. "Exotics have different infectious diseases than dogs and cats and since they are prey animals, they should not be kept in the same area where dogs and cats are kept," Lichtenberger explains.

This was among the lessons she took from India, where electricity and refrigeration were unreliable and where animals the average American would consider exotic were commonplace. As a student, about 60 percent of her caseload was water buffalos, about 30 percent dogs and the remainder camels, elephants and whatever else came along. She learned to love working with the more unusual animals, even after a run-in with a rabid buffalo led to a painful series of rabies shots.

By the time her schooling was over, she was ready to come home. Lichtenberger took a series of internships, residencies and positions in Connecticut and Hawaii before returning to Wisconsin in 1997.

Primarily working in emergency and critical care, she began to do more research on exotics. She published on such topics as fluid therapy and pain management in birds and other exotics.

"I realized there really was not much written on exotics for emergency and critical care," she says.

Thinking Like a Client

No matter the type of animal, emergency care requires a slightly different approach, Lichtenberger says.

"The animal is going to come in very sick, or having just been injured, and they're not going to be familiar with us and they are probably going to be scared," she says. Add to this situation an owner who's probably frightened and anxious, so the veterinarian has to tread carefully.

"I always try to relate, 'How would I want to be treated if I was rushing into the hospital with my precious, injured dog?' " she says. "I would be hysterical. So I know these are very, very delicate situations, and we really try to deal carefully with people so they get the best information and the best care possible."

Cathy Larson says that's what she appreciated about Lichtenberger when they met a dozen years ago. Her German shepherd, Halley, took ill while traveling, so Larson stopped at a clinic in Milwaukee, where Lichtenberger not only stabilized Halley but diagnosed inflammatory bowel disease and put her on a regimen.

Larson was sufficiently impressed that she drives two hours to consult with Lichtenberger whenever one of her dogs has a persistent or complicated health problem.

"From the first night we walked in with Halley, there was a comfort level there," Larson says. "She was able to talk to us in everyday language, putting things in a way that we could understand and giving us options."

Lichtenberger says the challenge and intensity is what she loves about emergency care, whether she's working with a German shepherd, rabbit, ferret or water buffalo.

"It might be chaotic here for eight hours straight, but by the end of the day, you get everybody stabilized and you know that you've done the best you could possibly do for (each animal), and that's a feeling of great satisfaction." ●



Dr. Marla Lichtenberger examines a young Macaw, above, and a dwarf rabbit, left. She has written peer-reviewed articles on everything from miniature schnauzers and cats to domestic ferrets and ducks. She also has lectured internationally on emergency care for small animals and exotics.