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Birds and Rabbits and Snakes, Oh My!

By Mona Miller, DVM



Blizzy, on right, recovered fully from a broken leg
Photo Amanda Griggs

During the summer, I've had a few conversations with friends and acquaintances about what kind of veterinary care could be done for family pets other than dogs and cats. I believe one direct question was "Why would I take my rabbit to the vet?" In the context of veterinary medicine and specialty care, the answer is that theoretically whatever can be done for dogs and cats can be done for birds, reptiles, rabbits and rodents. This includes preventive health care, discussion of diet and environment, diagnosis and treatment of medical and surgical issues. There are commonly known diseases that can occur in almost every exotic species, as well as the unusual - not too different than dogs and cats. There can be limitations based on size of patient, specific characteristics of the animal, and knowledge of the veterinarian. There can also be limitations on the client's part based on value, financial factors and ability to handle the individual animal.

I recently attended an annual national conference hosted by the Association of Avian Veterinarians and the Association of Exotic Mammal Veterinarians, along with 500 other veterinarians and nurses. This is a five-day offering of lectures and labs covering a wide range of topics: bird behavior, ferret hormones, CT imaging of tortoises, rabbit dentistry, anti-seizure and arthritis medications for birds. Generally most species can have similar diagnostic procedures as mammals - blood panels, urine and fecal checks, radiographs, advanced imaging such as magnetic resonance and computer

tomography. Some diagnostics are logistically difficult to perform, but not necessarily impossible, such as blood pressure checks. Most often, specialty centers are involved in advanced diagnostic and treatments, such as complicated surgeries.

Not all veterinarians work on all species. The biggest factor involved in that decision is what the individual vet feels comfortable with, based on his/her past experiences, level of education with those species and present/future interests. For instance, I grew up in the suburbs of Los Angeles with limited exposure to horses and I had minimal interest during vet school in pursuing a career in equine medicine. As a result, 20 years later, I do not feel I am qualified or competent to practice my skills on horses - and most horses know it! However, I have been interested in avian/exotic companion animal medicine and feel I am a good general vet for these species. There are also specialists in these disciplines - these vets are defined by a residency program and a specialty examination, similar to the process for a board-certified vet surgeon, internist, cardiologist, etc.

The species that I've worked on include the rabbit, guinea pig, chinchilla, hamster, rat and mouse, ferret, turtle and tortoise, and many species of birds. More unusual animals presented to me as family pets have included the sugar glider, prairie dog, turkey and back yard chicken. Clients value these animals along the same spectrum as dogs and cats, and the same set of options can be offered, from the conservative cost-saving approach to the highly technological and medically thorough approach.



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