

Ambulatory Exotic and Nontraditional Species Medicine



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KEYWORDS

• Ambulatory • Exotics • History • Medicine

KEY POINTS

- Veterinary medicine started with ambulatory medicine.
- Ambulatory medicine is one of the fastest growing aspects of veterinary medicine.
- Ambulatory exotic animal medicine has an essential role in veterinary medicine.
- An ambulatory practice can provide as good of, if not better, quality of medicine as a brick and mortar practice to nontraditional species patients.

Ambulatory medicine was the foundation of veterinary practice, as the first veterinarians were purely mobile, taking their materials and skills to the patients and owners. This practice was generated out of need, as the first clients were that of farmers and horsemen who needed care for their herds and flock. In an effort to maintain their livelihood and herds, it was far more feasible to bring the doctor to the patients.¹ Even the term *veterinarian* comes from the Latin *veterinarius* defined as “pertaining to the beast of burden.”

James Alfred Wright, also known as James Herriott,² both romanticized as well as practiced ambulatory medicine at the height of its extent. In his memoirs, he described the transition of small animal practice from primarily farm and house calls to the expansion of the brick and mortar practice while facilitating the separation of small animal from large animal practice.²

Despite human medicine continuing the practice of house calls for patients, veterinary house call medicine declined much sooner, as brick and mortar was chosen for ease and simplicity. The concept of taking the pet to the vet rather than the vet to the pet was preferred for many reasons, not the least of which was to increase efficiency; provide support staff; and, because much of early small animal veterinary

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care was surgical, to provide a dedicated and controlled environment for safe and effective procedures.

Since then, to say that veterinary medicine has changed is nothing but an understatement. Veterinary doctors now have so much more available to their patients than providing empirical care based on presentation and symptoms (not to undervalue these aspects, in any way) and basic surgical care as the extent of the therapy that could be provided. As clinicians, there is the offering of extensive biochemical and hematologic testing; assessments of hormone levels; genetic and cytochemical marker testing for countless diseases; imaging techniques with the ability to identify internal structures and pathologies as, if not more, detailed than with open approaches; therapies that pioneer treatments in human medicine; and surgical techniques rivaling that of any medical center. And all of this is readily available to any clinician (Fig. 1).

With this, there has been the return to ambulatory medicine over the last couple of decades. The North American Veterinary Conference group has listed this as one of the fastest growing segments of veterinary medicine,³ with demand often outstripping supply. Mobile hospitals are readily available and affordable, with both initial as well as long-term costs much lower than that of traditional clinics. Their growth has been so rapid that many states have been adding specific rules and requirements to their veterinary board regulations so that the care and services provided are ensured to meet the same practice standards of care as any other veterinarian. A recent visit to 2 major veterinary medical conferences by the author identified at least 6 distinct companies/franchises recruiting veterinarians to staff mobile veterinary practices covering both the Western and Eastern United States, with rapidly growing clienteles and practices.⁴ In fact, many of these mobile hospitals are better equipped than their stationary counterparts; there are those that already offer services beyond the typical routine practice.⁵

Thus, not with a purr but with a roar has been the return of ambulatory medicine to small animal practice.

Ambulatory nontraditional species medicine is, however, a relatively new development within the aspect of veterinary medicine. This new development is primarily because exotic animal medicine (other than zoo animal medicine) is also a relatively new addition to veterinary practice that has experienced massive growth in the last 30 years. Starting in the 1950s and 1960s was the serious development of zoo animal medicine⁶ with the establishment of the American Association of Zoologic



Fig. 1. All manners of patients will be encountered with ambulatory exotic animal practice. Here, blood is being collected from a shark for analysis. (Courtesy of Adolf K. Maas III, DVM, Bothell, WA.)

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