Incorporating/Integrating Exotic Ambulatory Medicine into a Brick-and-Mortar Practice

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KEYWORDS

• Exotics • Mobile • Veterinary practice • Medicine • Surgery • Avian • Reptilian • Mammalian

KEY POINTS

- When creating an ambulatory practice, vision, core vision, goals, and related business plans need to be clearly defined.
- Both practice types have clear advantages and disadvantages.
- Successful management of an ambulatory practice can create the venue for a stationary practice and vice-versa.
- Stationary practices cannot replace the insights gained by a well-organized ambulatory practice.

INTRODUCTION

Little is found in literature about the evolution of an exotic ambulatory service into a fully functioning stationary practice or the converse of "brick-and-mortar" practices developing mobile services: experience, Internet searches, and opinions from colleagues are the start of what is likely to become a more completely reviewed topic in the future. Application of these ideas, principles, and philosophies regarding successful establishment of an ambulatory veterinary exotic practice may enable practitioners to reach individual goals outlined in their vision and mission statements. Ideally, combining both ambulatory and stationary practice types give clinicians the best opportunity to provide nontraditional species patients appropriate evidence-based care.

What constitutes an "exotic animal" is relatively unclear. By contrast, the definition of domestic animals is those selectively bred and habituated to human needs and purposes in a captive environment.[1] All veterinarians receive training in domestic animal husbandry, medicine, and surgery, primarily dogs, cats, cows, and horses. Also

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included are the common domestic farm animals that are considered production animals and not pets.

"Exotics," within the vernacular of veterinary medicine, are often animals that exist in the wild, but also may be domesticated. Captive breeding of wild species is often an early process of domestication, but history has shown that not all species, despite best efforts, can be domesticated. Color morphs, patterns, size differences, tameness, and conformation differences are all traits generated by captive breeding but should not be considered complete domestication. The debate is how to differentiate breed from species to categorize small mammals, such as rabbits, ferrets, and many rodents. For the practical purpose of this article, exotic refers to what are often referred to as "nontraditional species"; those patients that are not long-standing within the field of companion veterinary medicine and may include wild or zoologic animals, aquatic species such as fish, relatively common pets such as guinea pigs and parrots, or even domestic animals that have become pets such as chickens, goats, or rabbits. Knowledge of each species' natural histories must guide diagnoses, therapies, husbandry recommendations, socialization techniques, and behavioral management.

Exotic animal medicine and surgery is a rapidly evolving field in veterinary science. Exotic animal medicine and surgery is being regularly taught in veterinary schools and small animal stationary practitioners are seeing exotics at an increased rate.[2,3] Advancements in technology, science, and natural history knowledge have enhanced an understanding of the requirements of these species, allowing earlier diagnoses, interventions, and increasing successful outcomes. Unfortunately, many stationary practicing exotic animal veterinarians practice without the appreciation of ambulatory practice with the insight it can provide. Site-based medicine has great value, as this is where clinical practice can see the answers to questions about the value of natural history. The limitations of this lack of species-specific normal biological understanding may very well lead doctors to treating the symptoms of disease without considering the true etiology.[4]

House calls, farm calls, and site visits to collections have historically provided veterinarians a fundamental understanding of the disease as it relates the husbandry of the group. In bovine, equine, swine, and poultry production medicine, the environment management strategies used through hygiene, sanitation, nutrition, and grouping are central to maximizing production and disease prevention. Exotic ambulatory medicine must have the same principles applied to the species encountered, affecting both individual pets as well as collections. Ambulatory medicine in this article refers to medical care that is provided on a mobile, on-site basis, including consultation, diagnosis, treatment, intervention, and rehabilitation services. Additionally, ambulatory practice includes traveling to the site of the patient or collection to observe them and their dynamic interaction with the environment.

IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEM

The basis of how a captive exotic patient is failing to thrive requires understanding how the animal's captive environment differs from its native environment. Husbandry standards vary, as they are often based on misperceptions of what is an appropriate environment, enclosure, or meal, and can change seasonally based on the given species. Proper assessment of husbandry, whether indoors or outdoors, includes, but is not limited to, the cohabitating species, thermoregulation, humidity, photoregulation, ventilation, microhabitats, toxic plants/insects, nutrition, feed availability, and hygiene/sanitation. Ambulatory practice allows direct observation of diverse animal habitat design giving insight to fundamental health issues.[5–7]

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