

"Veterinarians offer new levels of care"

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by B. Lou Guckian

New mom Carrie Ramirez has lived with the heartache of Pinki's illness since he was diagnosed with cancer three years ago.

One of her three "babies," Pinki is a 5-year-old male cat who lives with Ramirez and her husband, Rene, the couple's 5-month-old son, Ryan, and Pinki's sister, Ali. "There was a cancerous tumor attached to Pinki's left shoulder and the entire leg was going to have to be removed," Ramirez, 26, recalls. "I was devastated and was willing to do anything to save him."

Pinki lost his leg but got a second chance at life.

Ramirez is one of millions of Americans with pets. Along with the 52 million dogs and 57 million cats that live with U.S. families, many birds, snakes and other animals have found comfy havens in the homes of humans. They are the children of the childless, lifelines for the elderly and supportive companions to the sick and lonely.

When the inevitable does happen, Ramirez will lose a cherished family member. Losing a pet can be just as traumatic as losing a human loved one, says psychotherapist Ann Bosarge, who specializes in trauma, grief and anger counseling. "For many people, their pet has become their companion," Bosarge explains. "It gives them a reason to live, something to come home to. When they lose their companion, they grieve."

Because animals play an integral role in the family today, pet owners such as Ramirez have placed an increased demand on veterinarians to prolong the quality of their animals' lives. As a result, many veterinarians have established specialty practices or refer their patients to vet specialists.

Vet specializations, says Dr. John Herbold, president of the Veterinary Medical Association of Bexar County, have developed as a response to a growing need. "For example," he says, "people wanting to save animals that were hit by cars or in other accidents drove the development of the veterinarian emergency medical and critical care society."

The American Veterinary Medical Association currently identifies 17 colleges or boards that offer vet specializations mirroring many of those in human medicine, including oncologists, dentists, behaviorists, psychologists and nutritionists.

"Most, if not all, medical procedures, both pharmaceutical and surgical, are developed in animal models prior to their use in humans," explains Herbold. "It might not always be a dog or cat species but a lot of the information learned that is applied to human medicine is developed in animal medicine first."

Pinki's vet, Dr. Pat Mims, often refers patients to specialists when his own lab equipment or knowledge base does not provide the level needed to best treat the animal. "There is specialty equipment used for things such as CT scans, MRI, chemotherapy, radiation, or other types of advanced diagnostics that will only be found in a specialty practice," he says.

Despite a successful surgery on Pinki's cancerous leg three years ago, Mims advised Ramirez that the cancer would likely come back one day to claim her cat's life. When Mims confirmed that the cancer had returned, Ramirez was once again devastated at the news.

Mims advised Ramirez of two options available to Pinki in radiation therapy: "palliative" and "full-blown." He explained that neither option offered a guaranteed cure. Palliative, or supportive therapy, slows the disease but does not cure it, and can cost from \$400 to \$500 for three weekly treatments.

Despite a very small cure rate, a very aggressive or full-blown course of treatment can cost from \$1,200 to \$1,500 for a series of treatments each week over a four-week period. But money wasn't the issue for Ramirez. Her primary concern was for Pinki's quality of life. "We would've paid anything to get him comfortable and well," she says.

Ramirez found that making a decision for Pinki was a tough, emotional struggle: "It is very difficult because you feel so helpless." In deliberating over her decision for Pinki, Ramirez talked at length with her husband and with her parents, who are also animals lovers. Then she decided to forgo the treatment.

Having made her decision for Pinki, Ramirez doesn't focus on what is to come. Instead, she makes every minute count. "We're taking lots of pictures of Pinki with Ryan so he'll know about his first cat," she says. "Every day that I wake up and hear Pinki meow at me, I cherish it."

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Sidebar: "Grief counselors help pet owners"

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Losing a pet can be as traumatic as losing a human loved one, says Dr. John Cozad, a veterinarian and specialist in grief counseling for bereaved pet owners. Sharing the loss is important, Dr. Cozad says, and a good place to turn is the Delta Society of San Antonio.

Established in 1989, the all-volunteer, non-profit organization offers educational seminars, a Pet Partners program and a Grief Support Help Line. "We find that pets in the family structure can serve just about any purpose that a child, parent or grandparent can serve in that family," says Dr. Cozad, past-president of the Delta Society and a veteran help line volunteer.

Help line volunteers are trained by mental health professionals, explains Elizabeth Branch, current president of the San Antonio chapter, including grief counselors, therapists and psychologists. And, she added, each of the volunteers has suffered the loss of a pet themselves.

"The hundreds of people that have called over the years have said that talking to our volunteers and the material that was sent to them has helped them tremendously," Branch said.

Some people think that when you lose a pet, you should get a new one right away. Dr. Cozad disagrees. While some people can transfer their love right away, he says, most cannot. "Of course," he says, "there are always the great memories of the pet, and those are things that no one can take away from you."

To volunteer for the Delta Society of San Antonio or reach the Grief Support Help Line, call 614-6734.

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