

The METROWEST DAILY NEWS



Nursing supervisor Anne-Marie Stokes, left, and nurse Rebekah Eisner care for Nala. The dog underwent surgery at the Veterinary Emergency & Specialty Center of New England in Waltham and recently returned home. Below, X-rays of a dog are seen in the center's radiology department.

Critical care for critters

Waltham center provides emergency services to animals



PROFILE

VETERINARY EMERGENCY & SPECIALTY CENTER OF NEW ENGLAND

Co-owners: Dr. Amy Shroff and Dr. Brian Huss

Employees: 50

Industry: Veterinary emergency and specialty care

Company background: Based in Waltham, the Veterinary Emergency & Specialty Center of New England provides specialty services in emergency and critical care, surgery, internal medicine, radiology and cardiology. Its Web site address is www.vescone.com.

SMALL BUSINESS

Work in Progress

By Bob Tremblay
Daily News Staff

WALTHAM — The patients arrive on two legs. Most come with four legs. A few have no legs. None of them has much to say.

That's because these patients are animals, which come to the Veterinary Emergency & Specialty Center of New England (VESCONe) for special medical attention.

While MetroWest is home to several veterinary hospitals, VESCONe is the only one offering 24-hour emergency critical care service. Only five other hospitals provide similar care in the state, according to Dr. Amy Shroff, VESCONe's co-owner, co-chief of staff and director of emergency and critical care.

"We do emergency and critical care, surgery, internal medicine and radiology while a cardiologist comes in two days a week," says Shroff. "So

if they need a blood transfusion, special surgery, if they've been hit by a car, if they need special lab work, 24-hour critical care, an ultrasound or an endoscopy, they come here. What we don't do is wellness care. No vaccines, no grooming, no boarding, no spaying, no neutering, no dental care — things that the general practitioner does. What the family veterinarian does, we don't do. We work as an extension of the regular veterinarian to provide specialty care for their patients when they need it. As soon as they're well, they go back to their regular veterinarian."

VESCONe'S building also houses the New England Veterinary Oncology Group, one of only a handful of animal cancer treatment centers on the East Coast. "We work closely with them," says Shroff.

VESCONe's emergency care unit treats an average of 10 to 30 animals daily with the weekends and nights tending to be busier times.

Center gives animals emergency care

Referrals aren't required though appointments are necessary to see a specialist. These can be made by the animal's owner or its veterinarian.

"Walk-ins are seen by the emergency staff first," says Shroff. "The model is very similar to a human hospital."

Illnesses run the gamut, according to the Wayland resident.

"Everything from trauma to toxicity, vomiting, diarrhea and heart failure," she says. While most of its patients are dogs and cats — the Waltham-based center has its own canine and feline blood bank — VESCONe also treats gerbils, hamsters, rabbits, ferrets, birds and reptiles. More unusual patients have included woodchucks, chinchillas, bearded dragons, iguanas and African gray parrots. It even treated a prairie dog afflicted with diarrhea and a snake suffering from mouth rot.

That said, the center focuses most of its attention on domestic pets. Exotic animals typically get sent to specialists.

Shroff started VESCONe in 2001 with Dr. Brian Huss. She owned an after-hours animal hospital in Needham and Huss, a Sudbury resident, ran his own mobile specialty surgical practice.

"We decided we wanted to create a 24-hour specialty hospital that would be open 24/7 to the public and referring veterinarians and would combine quality service with superior veterinary care," says Shroff.

The center now treats 30 to 35 patients daily. Both the client base and revenue have grown between 20 and 30 percent annually, according to Shroff.

She attributes the growth to VESCONe's "excellent mix of state-of-the-art medicine and surgery coupled with compassion and a superior level of care. We also treat the referring veterinarians as they should be treated. They're kept abreast of the decisions we make. We do what they want us to do and we're accessible to the veterinarian and the client. And we're compassionate. That's what people tell us."

Shroff also credits VESCONe's staff. "They make the hospital," she says. "They're dedicated and excellent."

The center's Web site documents its success stories. Soon to be added will be the story of Nala, a mixed breed who needed emer-

gency surgery for a serious intestinal problem. "It was touch-and-go for a little bit whether she would make it," says Shroff. "It was an unusual injury with a high mortality rate, but we beat the odds. She's a wonderful dog and her owners are wonderful people. We're extremely happy." After 11 days at VESCONe, Nala went home earlier this month.

Nala's treatment required "a financial commitment" from the owners, according to a Shroff. The cost for center's services range from \$200 to \$10,000 depending on how many specialists work on the animal and the amount of work done.

"It can be expensive for the level of care, but we try to make it a doable situation," says Shroff. "For example, we offer a program called CareCredit, a medical, dental and veterinary credit card. Once you're approved, we can use that to pay your bill and we pay for the processing and interest fee so you can spread your payments out interest-free for over a year."

About 35 percent of its patients' owners use the program. Pet insurance is also available.

"We try to be as upfront and communicative with clients (about the cost)," says Shroff. "We give them daily updates and an estimate ahead of time. We try to make sure there are no surprises in terms of what the cost will be so they understand what they're getting into and make an informed decision."

The center has an excellent success rate, according to Shroff. "We don't have any numbers, but if the animal has a chance to survive, the majority of them do with our level of care," she says.

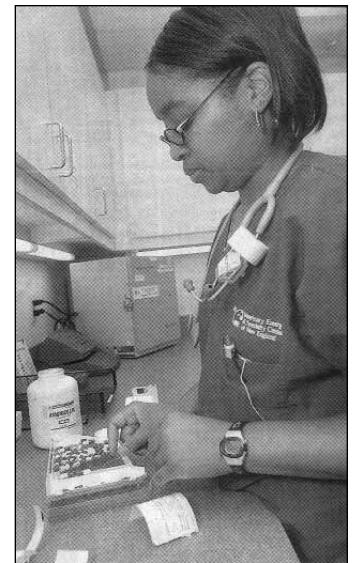
The center's 15,000-square-foot facility includes four large glass-enclosed ICU wards, three surgery suites, a special procedures room, a 20-by-50 treatment area, an isolation suite, a full in-house laboratory, two radiology suites, six exam rooms, a conference room for in-house continuing education, and a consultation/bereavement room.

One of the challenges of treating animals is they're not going to tell you where it hurts. "So you have to be an astute diagnostician," says Shroff. "And you have to be judicious about the diagnostics. We all love the animals equally but conserving the client's funds is a concern.



Above, Dr. Amy Shroff, co-owner of the Veterinary Emergency & Specialty Center of New England (VESCONe) stands in one of the hospital's labs.

Right, nurse Jennifer James fills prescriptions for animals in the pharmacy at VESCONe.



"This is a team effort — the owner, the referring veterinarian and ourselves. We all work together to see this animal through a really difficult time. Ultimately, we're promoting the human-animal bond. That's what drives us.

"This is an emotional decision for owners to bring their pets here. This is not necessarily a necessity. It's a choice people have and we want to make sure this hospital continues to provide what clients and veterinarians need. "Sometimes the situation is very grave. We never make a decision for an owner. We try to give them as much information as possible to guide the owner toward making that decision themselves.

"Some situations are treatable, but others where the patient is in end-stage kidney failure, end-stage heart failure or out of remission if they have cancer, then euthanasia is an option that's more strongly recommended than others. Sometimes owners know that. Sometimes they don't and need us to guide them.... A loss of a pet can be very traumatic. For us, too."

Aware of this emotional situation, VESCONe is starting free grief counseling classes to be run by a licensed therapist. The first class will be held Wednesday, Dec. 7 at 7 p.m. at the center's 180 Bear Hill Road facility.

VESCONe also hosts free first aid classes. In light of the recent spate of hurricanes, disaster preparedness will be discussed. One of the center's veterinary nurses, Amy Breton, spent two weeks caring for some of the thousands of pets left homeless by Hurricane Katrina. The next class is Feb. 20 at 7 p.m.

Shroff, who owns two dogs, says she has always loved animals and always wanted to be a veterinarian.

"I like creating an environment where nurses and doctors can grow and do great medicine," she says. "I really like the idea of being there in a crisis situation for a client and their pet and seeing a positive outcome.... That's what keeps me going." While the patients may have difficulty expressing their gratitude, some can make their feelings felt in ways their human counterparts can't. Ever see a patient leave MetroWest Medical wagging his tail?