Creature comfort

Veterinary students at the Large Animal Clinic get hands-on experience with everything from cows and horses to deer and llamas.

By LYNNE M. BONENBERGER

Nobody knew how the young deer—just three and a half months old—had broken its leg.

Its owner did know where to take the fawn for treatment. Ohio State’s Large Animal Veterinary Clinic outside Marysville provides much-needed services for horses, cows, goats, sheep, llamas, alpacas, deer, and even bison from throughout a 16-county area.

Having an off-site university facility to treat large animals is a “one-of-a-kind thing in the country,” said director and veterinarian Bimbo Welker.

The five doctors on staff help ease the shortage of rural veterinarians in Ohio, while the six to 10 students in rotation at any one time get an education in field versus in-house medicine, Welker said.
Left and bottom left: Student Heather Penton and clinic director Bimbo Welker X-ray a fawn’s leg before its cast is removed with a saw. Watching through a window are Alex, left, and Taylor Miller. Their father, Jonathan Miller of London, Ohio, had brought the deer to the clinic after it broke its leg.

Below: Penton and Welker examine a resident of Ohio State’s Equine Center on Sawmill Road in Columbus. Several dozen horses are boarded at the facility, which conducts teaching and research and provides training and reproductive services.

Bottom: Veterinarian Martey Masterson holds a three-month-old calf as Penton and Heather Preston, left, prepare to clean an infected joint. They will flush the joint with saline solution followed by iodine, then inject antibiotics.

Photos by RICK HARRISON
The students see some animals at the clinic, which has stalls for overnight or extended stays, but they spend most of their time on farms.

In a barn or out in a pasture, Welker pointed out, “there’s less information available, not as much data, not as much equipment, and fewer helpers” than at the Marysville facility or an urban practice. “Students learn to do things using their hands-on diagnostic skills,” he said.

Before Ohio State bought the clinic in the late 1960s, it was a private practice treating both small and large animals out of a small facility with just one veterinarian. The clinic almost closed in the mid-1980s.

“Problem was, no one on campus knew what was going on out here,” said Welker, a graduate of Ohio State and Texas A&M who came on board in 1991 to rebuild the operation.

Since then, the university has acquired two related facilities. One, in West Liberty, was donated; the other, a practice in Urbana that had been the Marysville clinic’s biggest competitor, was purchased.

And, in 2005, the clinic moved into a new and much larger space on a sprawling parcel of land next to the Union County Humane Society, where the students sometimes volunteer.

Welker said the Large Animal Clinic now has thousands of clients, ranging from folks with a goat or a few sheep in the backyard to a 5,000-head dairy farm in Kenton.

It has become the No. 1-rated rotation for fourth-year students in the College of Veterinary Medicine, all of whom are required to spend time at Marysville. The “tipping point,” Welker said, came in the late ‘80s and early ‘90s, when the college started to see more students from urban backgrounds. “They had less experience on farms,” Welker said; the Marysville rotation helps bring such students up to speed.

The students, 80 percent of whom are women, generally spend two weeks living and working at the facility. Some of them come back for additional rotations. They’re up early every morning for 7 o’clock seminars, Welker said. They see scheduled appointments as well as walk-ins, then they often “hit the truck” to call on off-site clients. Welker takes advantage of the time spent bumping along the back roads of Ohio to lecture about...
the business side of things as well as veterinary medicine.

The students participate in the clinic’s educational programs, which include instruction for owners on how to take care of some minor conditions themselves.

They may help run drug tests at county fairs or visit clients at the Ohio State Fair. They sometimes treat animals at the Columbus Zoo and Aquarium, and they’re on call for the clinic’s 24-hour emergency service.

They also conduct tours of the facility for 4-H groups, and they keep the place shipshape—mopping, doing laundry, cleaning the surgery room.

One day a few months ago, several students were on hand when the owner of the fawn with the broken leg brought it in to have its cast removed under the watchful eyes of his two children.

In the next room, students and staff monitored another deer that lay listlessly in one of the stalls, having barely lived through the night.

The students sedated a calf in order to treat an infected joint—a procedure that took several tries and the help of veterinarian Martey Masterson to wrestle the sleepy but stubborn animal into position.

Then it was off to the truck and down Route 33 to Columbus to examine horses at Ohio State’s equine facility on Sawmill Road.

“It’s pretty much 24/7 for the students,” Welker said—and the animals entrusted to their care deserve nothing less.

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