



# TLC + VET = Winning Experience

MedVet Medical & Cancer Centers for Pets named  
2014 AAHA-Accredited Referral Practice of the Year

by Jen Reeder

WHEN KATE MCDONOUGH TOOK HER CHOCOLATE LAB, Jake, to her veterinarian for a nail trim, she was shocked to learn his lymph nodes were swollen and he should see a specialist. The Ohio resident drove 45 miles to MedVet Medical & Cancer Centers for Pets in Columbus and became a “basket case” when she learned he had lymphoma. But the MedVet team helped her cope when she brought her pooch in for chemotherapy treatments each week by providing not just excellent medical care—Jake is now in remission—but by being so caring.

“[Jake] acted like he was going on a playdate every time he would go there for chemo,” McDonough said. “His last chemo treatment actually was on his birthday, and they had a birthday party for him.”

So McDonough was thrilled—but not surprised—when AAHA named MedVet Medical & Cancer Centers for Pets in Columbus the 2014 AAHA-Accredited Referral Practice of the Year.

MedVet has grown exponentially since Bill DeHoff, DVM, MS, DACVS, was a founding partner in 1988. DeHoff left the security of teaching surgery at The Ohio State University because he perceived the demand for specialty services. Several other veterinarians who worked the night shift at Columbus Veterinary Emergency Service offered him an opportunity to lease space during the day, and MedVet was born.



Practice of the Year

1st Place 2014

He said cultivating a mutual respect with referring veterinarians has been a priority since day one.

“MedVet is an extension of the referring veterinarians we serve,” DeHoff said. “No matter how good you get, you wouldn’t have gotten that client on your own.”

Now the Columbus practice has expanded into a 54,000-square-foot facility with 272 employees (including 42 veterinary specialists) and is the administrative headquarters for six MedVet branches in Ohio and Louisiana with a total of 626 employees. In 2013—its 25th anniversary year—MedVet had almost 32,000 appointments in its flagship location alone.

### **The experience**

Patricia Botic, senior vice president of development, said AAHA accreditation is an important component of the high standard of care that is a hallmark of the “MedVet Experience.” MedVet Columbus is AAHA-accredited in 11 specialties: anesthesiology, surgery, internal medicine, medical oncology, radiology, radiation oncology, dermatology, neurology, cardiology, rehabilitation, and ophthalmology.

“The MedVet Experience is for our referring partners, our clients and patients, and also for our employees—our technical staff and client service representatives as well as our doctors,” Botic said. “We believe that, from first touch to last touch, each one of these individuals should have a positive, engaging, compassionate experience of the highest quality.”

Botic said new employees learn about AAHA accreditation on their first day and receive two pins to wear on their uniforms, one with the AAHA logo and the other promoting the practice’s core values of T.L.C.—teamwork, leadership, and compassion.

Eric Schertel, DVM, PhD, DACVS, veterinary surgery specialist, president and chief medical officer of MedVet, said these core values tie into MedVet’s mission statement of “leading specialty health care for pets.” He said teamwork refers not just to the team working together, but also to the relationship with the pet’s family and referring colleagues. Leadership is personal but also means leading in the community and in “veterinary health care in the broadest sense.” As for compassion,

he said that, like everyone who has dedicated their life to pet health care, “We come by it naturally.”

He said a strength of MedVet’s is patient care because specialists from different fields often collaborate on cases; a client who comes in through the emergency room might have radiologists reading films, surgeons or oncologists consulting, a neurologist who steps in, or a cardiologist.

“That kind of integrative, collaborative medicine is really the premier, the ultimate, form of medicine,” Schertel said. “We’ve got an incredible patient care team.... I just can’t say enough positive things about how hard they work and how dedicated they are.”

He added that MedVet Columbus has a strong residency program in multiple disciplines that offers a large caseload, and specialists there are often hired when they are willing to train and mentor residents. In turn, residents help keep the specialists at the top of their game.

“We turn out tremendous specialists who pass their boards and go on to contribute immediately to other specialty practices in the country,” he said. “They’re doing a great job out there.”

Of course, they’re also doing a great job at MedVet. Terah Webb, DVM, DACVO, is head of ophthalmology at the branch and a client experience officer. She is one of the ophthalmologists who pioneered endolaser cyclophotocoagulation glaucoma surgery for dogs and cats almost a decade ago.

“It’s a great practice to work in,” Webb said. “They obviously support doctors to help develop new techniques.”

### **Extra miles**

She said giving back to the veterinary community and the public is part of MedVet’s culture. MedVet provides free interpretive services for deaf clients, participates in an annual rabies clinic, offers discounted physical exams to breeders trying to improve a breed by detecting health issues, and gives free eye exams for service dogs throughout May. This includes working, disability assistance, search and rescue, police, military, and certified therapy dogs. There is also a special day each May in which these dogs get a free head-to-toe physical exam from a variety



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BILL DEHOFF, DVM, MS, DACVS

of specialists, including cardiologists, dermatologists, oncologists, and orthopedists.

“It’s great to find something early in a dog that is treatable. That, in the end, helps the person that they’re serving,” Webb said.

She said each veterinarian does 10 to 20 outreaches individually each year, which can include attending open houses held by referring veterinarians and rescue organizations, hosting booths at shelter fundraisers, and visiting a referring practice during lunch hour to share information about a new diagnostic tool. For example, cardiologists recently visited interested general practitioners to introduce them to a new iPhone app and case that turns the phone into an ECG.

“Partners in care definitely sums up the level of care that we provide to our patients and referring veterinarians,” Webb said.

Large-scale continuing education (CE)—both internal and external—is an integral part of the practice. Tami Adcock, CE and outreach coordinator, said MedVet hosts several Sunday seminars each month that are free to the referring community and focus on case presentations that demonstrate an interdisciplinary approach. They also host a Vet Tech Lecture Series, lectures for veterinary students at The Ohio State University, and present at local veterinary medical associations. MedVet sends a quarterly newsletter to the local veterinary community to keep them updated about upcoming CE events and other news.

“It helps keep the referral community in the know of what’s going on at MedVet and how we can better serve them,” Adcock said.

People who attend MedVet CE events can opt to donate to the MedVet Charitable Foundation, a nonprofit incorporated in 1994. The foundation helps fund veterinary CE, community outreach, medical care of working dogs, and some clinical research. MedVet clients can purchase a memorial brick featuring their pet’s name for the Paws Park, a garden where pets can play before and after appointments, to benefit the foundation.

“There’s a fountain and benches—there’s even a picnic table that was donated by a very well-known patient that came here for many years,” Adcock said.

MedVet management cultivates leadership with special internal seminars and opportunities for advancement. Miranda Zamarripa, RVT, hospital manager, was a registered technician at a general practice before joining the MedVet team in June 2007. She was promoted to service team leader by August for the orthopedic service. She was provided opportunities and developed to become the surgery, anesthesia, and rehab clinical manager. Then she was moved to become clinical manager of the internal medicine department in June 2012 to develop further skill sets and knowledge and became hospital manager in January 2014.

“I really had no idea when I started here what opportunities lay ahead of me,” Zamarripa said. “I feel so supported, indebted, and loyal to an organization that has really invested in me.”

She said the opportunities continue to grow as MedVet opens new locations; MedVet also offers financial support to employees who want to become certified as an RVT. Despite the rapid growth, she said MedVet “feels like a family.”

“I still walk through the hospital—even the other locations—and know most staff,” she said.

### Testimonials

Marje Kiley, who has been a MedVet client since 1999, said the hospital offers a “very friendly, open environment.”

“You walk in the front door and you think you’re in a human hospital—it’s that clean. There’s a counter in front of you with eight or nine people ready to help,” Kiley said. “And there’s a woman who, if you go very often, starts to know you by name and brings you a cup of coffee while you fill out the paperwork.”

Kiley said the back area is also distinctive because it isn’t full of dogs in cages, as she’s seen at other animal hospitals.

“There are many dogs that are just tethered to tables because they know them well enough to know they’re not going to jump on any other dogs and they know they’re uncomfortable in cages,” she said. “It’s a really unusual place.”

Kiley has been a devoted client since MedVet treated Nutmeg, her Cavalier King Charles spaniel, after the dog couldn’t walk one morning and a general practitioner told her, “This dog’s blown a disc, and you have a few hours to get the dog into surgery or it will never walk again.” An orthopedic surgeon at MedVet operated on Nutmeg and she was walking 6 weeks later.

Since then, Kiley has had a couple Cavalier King Charles spaniels with heart valve disease, a common issue with the breed, but she said, thanks to the care of MedVet cardiologist Linda Lehmkuhl and her team, her dogs have lived to be 14 and 15.

“That’s an example of Linda and the cardiology department having made miraculous gains in a breed where the life expectancy has always been around 9 years,” she said.

Linda Lehmkuhl, DVM, MS, DACVIM (Cardiology), veterinary cardiology specialist and regional medical director, said the clinical trials at MedVet’s Clinical Studies Center help advance veterinary medicine while supporting its clients, since clients receive deeply discounted—or often, free—care that can offer cutting-edge treatment. The clinical trials are held with client-owned patients, not research dogs, usually involving new medications but also novel devices and tests. There are usually several ongoing clinical trials at the Columbus location at any time, such as new cancer treatments or congestive heart failure studies in dogs.

“We don’t do every study that somebody wants us to do,” she said. “We make sure it’s best for our patients, best for



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—ERIC SCHERTEL, DVM, PHD, DACVS

our clients, best for our clinical team, and then, if we're interested, we're all in."

Lehmkuhl said it's a benefit for referring veterinarians because trials offer their clients cutting-edge care at a discounted fee, and it advances the science of veterinary medicine. She reiterated the importance of the relationship with referring veterinarians and said the acronym V.E.T. embodies the relationship MedVet seeks with them—veterinary partnership, excellence, and trust. For the trust portion, she said MedVet never "steals" clients, keeps communication lines open throughout the case, and is responsible with their clients' money.

Dawn Truesdale, DVM, hospital director at AAHA-accredited Linworth Animal Hospital in Worthington, Ohio (the Columbus suburb where MedVet is located), said she has referred clients to MedVet since 1999 because of the quality care—and trust.

"They do a great job of keeping us in the loop for care of our patients," Truesdale said.

Richard Vesper, DVM, owner of AAHA-accredited Avery Animal Hospital in Hilliard, Ohio, has referred all of his emergency cases and many other clients to MedVet since it opened (Vesper opened his practice in 1980). He said communication has stayed "phenomenal" even as MedVet has grown. His daughter, now a veterinarian at his practice, was a MedVet intern, and he was impressed by how much she learned in 13 months due to the volume and quality of care.

"There's been a huge emphasis on the experience for both the patient and the client, but they've also understood the right way to build a referral practice from the beginning, and that's with outstanding communication with me," Vesper said. "It's just a really good relationship we've had with them from the beginning." ✱



Freelance journalist Jen Reeder writes frequently about pets from her home office in Durango, Colo., which she shares with her husband and their Lab mix, Rio.

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