



The North Star

Canada's Pembroke Animal Hospital wins
2016 AAHA-Accredited Practice of the Year Award



by Jen Reeder

THROUGHOUT HIS CAREER, RICHARD HOBART, DVM, has championed collaboration among veterinary professionals. It started in 1981, when he joined the veterinary team at Pembroke Animal Hospital in the small Canadian town of Pembroke, Ontario. He convinced the owner at the time to seek AAHA accreditation, which the practice achieved on its first attempt in early 1983. Hobart flew to San Francisco to attend his first AAHA conference in 1984 and was impressed by the level of support offered by more experienced veterinarians.

"I was pretty young at the time and they were quite sincere in terms of telling me to contact them if I ever had any problems or wanted some advice," Hobart says.

"That's something I've tried to follow on myself when I go to conferences, because that's important to the individual and the profession."

In 1986, at the AAHA conference in New Orleans, Hobart met several veterinarians with whom he founded the North American Business Association (NABA) to share advice about management decisions. (NABA groups are now transitioning into AAHA-Accredited Veterinary Management Groups, in cooperation with Veterinary Study Groups [VSG].) That same year, he became a partner at the practice, which has continued to grow and become a pillar of the local community with Hobart as a co-owner.

“I’ve always thought it was important not only for me to network but for my managers and my staff to network with other practices,” Hobart says. “Camaraderie is underemphasized. It’s extremely important in terms of strengthening the profession and, to be honest, reducing our stress.”

This commitment to pursuing excellence through collaboration is one reason the American Animal Hospital Association named Pembroke Animal Hospital the 2016 AAHA-Accredited Practice of the Year.

It’s an impressive achievement for a practice in a town of around 16,500 residents in Ontario. Pembroke Animal Hospital employs 23 people, including five veterinarians and five RVTs, and operates two satellite locations in remote areas (which are also AAHA-accredited). The full-service hospital offers a surgical suite with two stations, digital radiography, an in-house laboratory, chiropractic services, and laser therapy, among other offerings.

“It’s a small town but we offer a lot of the big-city procedures and opportunities for our clients so they don’t have to travel elsewhere,” says Anita Voldock, RVT and practice manager. “We always want to change and be at the

cutting edge of new developments, and that’s what AAHA allows us to do. We don’t have to reinvent the wheel—we just have to follow AAHA’s lead. They have not steered us wrong yet.”

Voldock credits information garnered from AAHA and NABA with the success of Pembroke Animal Hospital, which also won the Ontario Veterinary Medical Association’s 2015 Practice Management Award. The organizations have also positively impacted Voldock’s career; she started as an RVT at the practice in 2004 and worked hard to become the practice manager.

“AAHA has been vital in developing my skills as a manager, and NABA has been vital in developing my skills in my field,” she says. “I come from the floor. I understood how to put in an IV catheter, but I didn’t understand financials and measuring compliance and that business aspect of the hospital. I just thought it was all about best medicine and everything else would follow. And it’s true, but you have to also treat it as a business.”

Voldock is quick to emphasize the importance of teamwork at Pembroke Animal Hospital, which values input from all team members. In January 2015, the practice implemented a leadership team that meets twice a month so a representative from each department can share ideas.

“AAHA stands for best medicine and excellent customer service, and that’s what we believe in,” Voldock says. “So when a policy is being developed, our team members can challenge each other and ask, ‘Are we doing it the AAHA way?’”

In one remarkable instance, members of the client service representative (CSR) team watched AAHA’s “Improving Compliance” webinar and decided to apply it to forward booking annual wellness exams. The CSR team members resolved to discuss the convenience and importance of pre-booking annual exams with clients and to give them an AAHA refrigerator magnet with their pre-booked appointment card in it. They’d also call with an appointment reminder a month before, and review compliance internally each month.

The baseline from March 2015 was 52 pre-booked appointments for 133 patients, for 39% compliance.



After watching the “Improving Compliance” webinar in June 2015, the team told Voldock they wanted to reach 100% compliance. The following month, 124 pre-booked appointments were scheduled for 124 patients—100% compliance!

“I was like, ‘You guys are reaching for the stars, but I’m behind you,’” Voldock says. “They brainstormed on why forward booking is important and why they wanted to do it. Not very many people get 100% compliance, so it’s absolutely amazing.”

She says all members of the team at Pembroke Animal Hospital are challenged to exceed AAHA’s continuing education (CE) requirements, and rewarded for doing so: “Dr. Hobart will do things to honor us if we’ve all reached our CE limit, like chocolate days.” The practice also hosts outside speakers to provide CE to pet owners and even other veterinary professionals in the region.

“That’s what makes us stand out: We not only embrace CE within our own hospital but we want to share it with the community,” Voldock says.

The practice shares more than CE with the community. Pembroke Animal Hospital supports a number of local nonprofits, whether through donations and fundraising events like microchip clinics, participating in charity walk-a-thons and food drives, or offering spay/neuters to the SPCA and the Lucky Project, which rescues feral cats and rehabilitates them for adoption.

“Pro bono work is really important to us,” says practice co-owner Guylaine Charette, VMD, a veterinary school graduate of the University of Montreal who is fluent in French and English. “There’s a reason we became veterinarians, right?”

Charette, who joined the practice in 1984, is fascinated by animal behavior, and was a driving force in adding the



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Pet Learning Centre to the hospital in the 1990s. Its core is puppy obedience classes with a revolving door for new pet owners. It also offers private or small-group classes in the afternoons for pets with behavior issues.

Charette is passionate about best care and also credited the culture of teamwork as a key to the success of the practice. For example, as a team, the hospital developed a protocol that patients over the age of 7 should have senior bloodwork screening. They resolved to review compliance results at biweekly group meetings. From August 2013 to August 2014, 169 senior bloodwork screens were given to patients out of 1,444 eligible pets, for 11% compliance. A year later, compliance grew to 21%, which the team views as a great start.

“Whatever it takes, it’s about patient care. We need to take care of our clients, because ultimately it’s about the wellness of our patients. And everybody on the team believes that,” Charette says. “We are absolutely, totally a team... and we’re planning on getting even better.”

Melissa Fitzgerald says she feels like she's "part of a family" at Pembroke Animal Hospital. She was hired onto the CSR team at the end of 2007 and was promoted to veterinary assistant in April 2015. She says the passion of everyone on the staff contributes to client compliance, as with senior bloodwork.

"I really believe in it, so I think if clients see it's something that I really do believe in, there is compliance with it," she says. "We all want to strive to be better every day and improve, so there's always room to do that."

Stacey McIntyre-Gonzalez, CSR team lead, says Pembroke Animal Hospital is the first workplace in any industry where she's felt her opinion was valued. She was trained on her first day to never say "no" to a client—if there's an urgent request, a client will be accommodated—and about what AAHA accreditation means. She says though AAHA's logo is proudly displayed on staff uniforms, in brochures, and on the practice's website and Facebook page, it's "definitely more than a logo here."

"It's a big reason I think our clients choose us as a hospital," she says. "We let them know it is a choice to be accredited through AAHA. That means every team member working in the hospital made a choice to live up to these standards of practice.... It's about best medicine. It's about community."

Another special way Pembroke Animal Hospital gives back to the community is by offering the Pathway of Life, a walkway behind the hospital and an adjacent crematorium.

(Co-owner Hobart is chairman of the pet cremations standards committee of the International Association of Pet Cemeteries and Crematories.) The pathway passes through flower gardens and is home to a gazebo with views of the Ottawa River and nearby mountains. The Pathway of Life is free to the public, and many clients scatter their pets' ashes there because they know it will be preserved as a memorial area for animals. Some also purchase bricks on which their pet's name is engraved and then placed on the path.

Clearly, supporting clients at every stage of pet ownership is important to the hospital's staff. Katy Connors, CSR team member, says one way the practice accommodates pet owners is to feature separate entrances and reception

desks for dogs and cats. Kitties are typically ushered out of the waiting area and into a designated feline examination room with hormone diffusers to reduce potential stress.

"Some cats are very scared to be in a carrier to begin with, let alone when there's a 130-pound Great Dane across the room barking at them," she says. "We understand that it can be a very stressful and overwhelming

experience for some clients and patients, so it's really important to us to make sure that their visit with us is stress free from the moment they get here to the moment they leave. Our clients definitely appreciate it."

Connors says the practice nurtures the human-animal bond by sharing as much information as possible with pet owners. All CSR team members are able to educate clients about the "basics of having a pet," such as dietary suggestions.





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“It’s phenomenal to see how people can grow with just a little bit of information,” she says. “We do a lot to ensure that our clients are happy and confident in raising their pets. I absolutely love it.”

She also says Pembroke Animal Hospital gives team members the support they need to grow, a sentiment echoed by Amy Bromley, RVT, who had co-op placement at the practice as a high school student in 2009. The “hands-on” experience convinced her she wanted to be a veterinary technician, and, while studying to become one, the RVTs at Pembroke supported her whenever she needed help with an assignment. She finished college and started working at Pembroke Animal Hospital the very next day.

“As cliché as it sounds, they’ve taught me so much about the veterinary field, and have essentially made me who I am today because I’ve been here since I was age 15,” Bromley says. “It’s made me a more well-rounded person as a whole.”

And she loves how much the practice gives back to her hometown community, and that clients can come in and feel welcome when staff greets them by name.

“It’s a really nice, homey atmosphere,” Bromley says.

Client Barbara Schaefer agrees, likening the practice to *Cheers* since everybody knows her dogs’ names. She drives an hour and a half to Pembroke Animal Hospital because of the level of care and service she receives.

Schaefer was particularly moved by the commitment and compassion of the staff last year when her terrier/border collie mix, Bob the Dog, had failing health from Cushing’s disease and other issues. Because of his traumatic upbringing before he was rescued, she felt strongly that she wanted him to be able to die peacefully at home. So when it was time, Pembroke’s Melissa Davies, DVM, and Practice Manager Voldock got in a car one Friday after work to drive the 90 minutes to Schaefer’s home for the euthanasia. They made a paw print and stayed for the interment, then told Schaefer they wouldn’t accept any payment.

“That’s the kind of people who are there,” Schaefer says. “They did that from their heart. So why would I go anywhere else?” ✖



Freelance journalist Jen Reeder is inspired by the passion of the team at Pembroke Animal Hospital.