



Top Dog

Prescott Animal Hospital named 2014 AAHA-Accredited Practice of the Year

by Jen Reeder

STEVEN H. DOW, DVM, MS, FACED A MAJOR DECISION IN 1995 when his two co-owners at Prescott Animal Hospital (PAH) in Prescott, Ariz., wanted to sell the practice to a corporate entity. Dow, who was a U.S. Army Airborne Ranger Captain in the Vietnam War before earning his DVM from Colorado State University in 1978, wanted to preserve the integrity of PAH, a “hometown” animal hospital founded in 1947—but the corporate entity wanted to call the shots. So Dow bought out his partners.

“It’s just continued to grow since then,” Dow said. “When I came here, there were 3 veterinarians and we had a staff of about 3. Now we have 10 veterinarians and a staff of about 50.”

Dow and his newly assembled team pursued and received AAHA accreditation in 1996 because he

wanted to have high internal standards and protocols. The mixed-animal practice continued to grow, and, seven years ago, PAH had to relocate its Equine Center a few miles away to meet customer demand for both branches—PAH’s Equine Center became Arizona’s first large animal hospital north of Phoenix. His commitment to his values has paid off.

In 2013, the practice served more than 6,000 clients, and the Veterinary Health Care Team of Arizona named PAH the Health Care Team of the Year. On March 20, 2014, AAHA announced that Prescott Animal Hospital and Equine Center is the 2014 AAHA-Accredited Practice of the Year.

Dow now works part-time at the practice; in December he sold his ownership interests to his trusted partners—Bryan



AAHA
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Practice of the Year

1st Place 2014

“AAHA gives us that chance to tell people that we really care about what we do and we really want to improve our medical knowledge and our medical abilities.”

—DEBBIE IVAN, VETERINARY ASSISTANT

K. Nolte, DVM; Kenneth C. Skinner, DVM; and Mark E. Anderson, DVM—and to his son and new co-owner Cameron S. Dow, DVM (Cameron Dow’s wife, Amie M. Dow, DVM, is also a PAH veterinarian). He said what makes PAH special is not only the quality of care, but the staff’s dedication to communicating with clients to learn the “story” of each client and his or her pet. Communication within the practice is also key.

“I’ve had a couple of clients ask me, ‘Is this a family practice?’ And I think, ‘Well, yeah, it is’... I think everybody here feels that way,” Dow said. “I can’t say enough good things about the veterinarians and the staff that we have. They all want to learn; they want to do the right things; their ethics are beyond reproach.... They make it fun.”

A breed apart

One lighthearted way the PAH staff works on internal communication is by assigning each staff member a dog breed personality profile. Employees take a personality assessment test to determine their primary communication styles. Labradors are extroverted optimists, German shepherds are reserved and organized, golden retrievers are the caring peacekeepers, and Jack Russell terriers are assertive implementers. In-depth descriptions of each breed’s personality profile are posted in the break room, and the team members wear

colored paw pins on their name tags that correspond to their breed.

Nikki Frost, CVT, CVPM, hospital administrator (Jack Russell), said everyone embraced the program when she introduced it in 2006. Since then, it has been an effective icebreaker with clients, who often ask about the color coding and then try to guess their own breed, and for new employees.

“It can be scary coming into a team of people that have been here for a while,” Frost said. “It opens doors for new team members.”

She said the breed dynamics are clear whether at lunch—friendly Labs might be surrounded at a table, while Jack Russells might not stop to eat, preferring instead to run errands—or in a meeting. For example, goldens won’t speak up often, but when they do it will be thoughtful and based on how other people might feel if something was changed. German shepherds want to hear facts, so meeting planners try to give them research beforehand in order for them to have time to consider a proposal. Jack Russells keep things moving, and Labs make it upbeat and fun.

The test asks multiple-choice questions, ranging from how to make decisions or deal with confrontation to style

of dress (“Pressed and neatly groomed?” or “Whatever you pulled out of the laundry basket?”). One veterinarian didn’t fit into one category, scoring an even split between all four breeds.

“We all tease her that she’s a cat,” Frost said. “And she is our kitty doctor.”

Frost said the dog breed personalities are just one way PAH strives to embody “The Platinum Rule” of treating others as *they* want to be treated. PAH is open seven days a week, offers home delivery of medication (through VetSource) and food (Royal Canine), and hosts a coffee bar and children’s play area with coloring books that they can bring into the exam rooms. The hospital also offers veterinary-supervised boarding with a dedicated kennel team and a comfort room for euthanasia, the walls of which are covered with photos and tributes sent by clients (home euthanasia services are also available).

Amber Hallett, marketing coordinator (Jack Russell), said the reception area has a lower counter so it is easy for front-desk staff to play with each pet that comes in—important to a staff of animal lovers.

“My favorite thing about working at Prescott Animal Hospital is the entire team’s dedication to the clients and patients,” Hallett said. “We try to make them as comfortable as possible while they are here.”

Giving back

Kenneth C. Skinner, DVM, co-owner since 2007 (Jack Russell), is also the attending veterinarian at the Heritage Park Zoological Sanctuary and Out of Africa Wildlife Park, where he performs all the medical procedures for a wide variety of species of animals, including lions, tigers, bears, deer, and rhinoceros. He has helped deliver baby

zebras and antelope, trimmed the beaks of tropical birds, and stitched lacerations on big cats after shooting them with tranquilizer darts—all on his days off.

“I was always taught that mammals are mammals, and they only get... certain diseases and that we should be able, as veterinarians, to pretty much treat any animal,” Skinner said. “I’ve always taken that to heart.”

PAH provides the two parks with discounted medical care and rebates and sponsors fundraising events. The practice also gives discounted veterinary care to local rescue groups like the United Animal Friends and the Yavapai Humane Society and offers free initial wellness exams for pets adopted from any animal shelter—even ones located out of the state of Arizona.

Prescott Animal Hospital also donates money and the time of its staff in order to assist in local emergencies. During the devastating 2013 wildfire season, which included the Doce Pit and Yarnell Hill Fires that killed 19 Prescott firefighters in total, the practice donated proceeds from nail-clipping services and had a client donation jar. Skinner, a founding member of the Arizona State Animal Response Team, helped organize resources and reported to the state about the situation. On a personal level, he helped evacuate people and pets—including one resident’s 500-pound Galapagos tortoises. Then he took 24-hour shifts as the attending veterinarian at the emergency animal shelters, because pets weren’t allowed at Red Cross shelters.

Skinner, the immediate past president of the Arizona Veterinary Medical Association, said he thinks his work outside the practice helps strengthen PAH by fueling his passion for veterinary medicine and connecting him with the public.

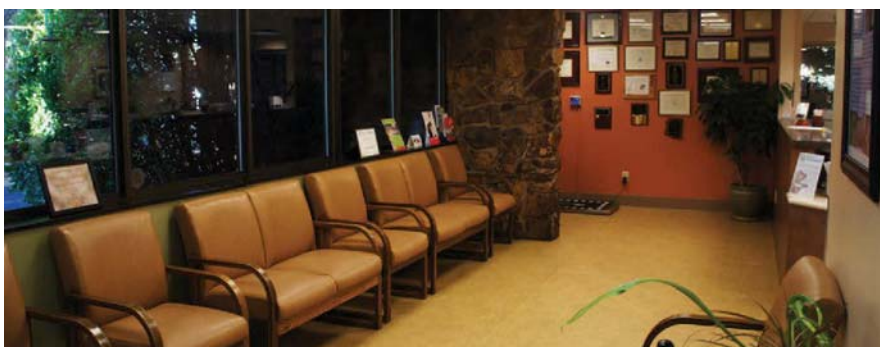


Photo courtesy of Prescott Animal Hospital

The reception area has a lower counter so it is easy for front-desk staff to play with each pet that comes in—important to a staff of animal lovers.

“That’s one of the reasons I live in a small town—to get to know these people and be involved with them,” he said. “I definitely enjoy getting out in the community and walking through the mall and knowing everybody.”

Clients agree

Prescott resident Jill Marnell is a second-generation PAH client; as a child, her parents took their cats, dogs, and horses to the practice. She remembers when their Dalmatian, Jazbo, was attacked by javelinas and had internal damage. Thanks to PAH’s efforts, he made a full recovery. Now she and her husband, Jim, take their two Maltese to see Skinner at PAH. “He’s just so personable and interested in the dogs and interested in us. We’ve seen him out and about in the community, and he has noticed us first and come up to speak to us, which is really nice,” Marnell said. “That just makes us feel more special.”

Jena Green, PAH veterinary assistant (Labrador), works with Skinner in the practice and the zoological parks. She said it is a “once in a lifetime” opportunity to work with such a variety of species. She worked at other practices before joining the PAH team 2½ years ago and said PAH stands out because usually there’s only so much room to grow with a practice—but because the PAH administration listens to staff ideas and supports every employee’s continuing education efforts with a financial contribution each year, she feels she could stay there forever and keep improving.

“I just feel like the sky’s the limit here,” Green said. “I can continue to be the best technician I can be and help out the practice.”

Marisa Abel, practice manager of PAH’s Equine Center (Labrador), said the center stays busy with clients ranging from backyard owners to folks in the rodeo circuit (PAH provides supervising veterinarians for free to the rodeo) or people who race horses in Phoenix. But their state-of-the-art surgical suite, which includes a hoist, padded rooms, and cameras for monitoring patients, sees not just horses but also cattle, sheep, goats, pot-bellied pigs, and alpacas. And because of Skinner’s ties to the zoo, the Equine Center team has even neutered tigers there.

She said the large animal branch complements the companion animal side particularly well because many of



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the veterinarians practice at both locations, which helps maintain the sense of belonging to one cohesive entity.

“We do have a separate location, but we’re still very much a part of each other,” Abel said.

Prescott native Joyce Mackin, who owns two mules, two dogs, two cats, and two turtles, says she has recommended PAH “many, many times” since she first brought her Labrador Skip to the practice nearly 35 years ago. She said PAH has a hometown feel that comes not from the locations or the structures, but the skill and empathy of its employees. She has seen “Dr. Mark” (Anderson) stay “cool as a cucumber” while he stanchied the bleeding of two horses simultaneously—one had been gored by a long-horned bull, and the other had run through a barbed wire fence. She has thanked “Dr. Bryan” (Nolte) for stitching up her mule’s nose in a way that didn’t even leave a scar. And “Dr. Steve” (Dow) has come to her home numerous times in the middle of the night for colic cases or when a sick pet had to be put down.

“It’s almost better than calling 911,” Mackin said. “They understand if you’re a basket case, and they also take very good care of your pets.”

AAHA proud

Debbie Ivan, veterinary technician (German shepherd), said she and her fellow employees are proud to work at an AAHA-accredited practice.

"If you want 'see Spot run' medicine, that's not us," Ivan said. "AAHA gives us that chance to tell people that we really care about what we do and we really want to improve our medical knowledge and our medical abilities."

PAH promotes the AAHA accreditation in myriad ways, including a plaque on the door, logo and information on the website, and brochures distributed in reception areas and in booths at special events. Ivan wears an AAHA pin above her name tag and recently had a client from out of state ask what it meant. So she talked about the high standards required for accreditation and sent her home with a brochure.

"She was very impressed," Ivan said.

With such a dedicated staff and loyal clientele, Dow (Jack Russell) has no regrets about not selling out when the opportunity arose. He said corporate entities would never reinvest in the community, which he thinks is of critical importance. PAH donated nearly \$35,000 in 2013 alone (not including in-kind donations) to local charitable

organizations as well as in memoriam contributions for euthanized patients to The Miki Society for Companion Animal Research at Colorado State University.

PAH employees volunteer for many charities, including 4-H and the equine assisted therapy group Horses with H.E.A.R.T. Dow volunteers his services through Soldier's Best Friend, a nonprofit that provides service or therapeutic companion dogs to veterans with PTSD or traumatic brain injuries.


"I've tried to make that part of the practice: giving back to the community, both financially and professionally, and it's worked out pretty well," Dow said. "I feel pretty strongly that we owe the community that, and we owe the world that, too." ✨



Freelance journalist Jen Reeder developed a bit of a crush on the Prescott Animal Hospital while researching this article.

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