

A Day in the Life of a Veterinarian

Follow a busy Texas veterinarian through a typical day.

By Denise Flaim

Move over, James Herriot. Compared to that country veterinarian of literary fame, today's animal doctor has to be a multitasker of 21st century proportions.

Kit Kampschmidt, DVM, is a case in point. He started practicing at Houston's Brittmoore Animal Hospital in 1984. Now a part owner, he oversees three associate vets and more than 20 other staffers. His interest in canine reproduction has led to a following of breeders obsessed with progesterone levels and oocytes, as well as a steady stream of online repro consults with veterinary professionals who belong to the 14,000-member Veterinary Information Network.

At home, things are just as bustling, with two teenagers, two French Bulldogs, one Pembroke Welsh Corgi, one Himalayan cat, and one Egyptian sand boa. All declined to speak about Kampschmidt for this story of a day in his busy life.

2 a.m.

The clownfish is swishing along the Technicolor coral reef. This could be Cozumel, or the Caymans, or any of the other Caribbean islands where Kampschmidt, an avid scuba diver, likes to take the plunge.

But there is a persistent electronic chirp in the background. Is that the dive computer? Has he been down too long?

No ... it's ... the beeper. Goodbye, REM-induced visions of an upcoming family vacation to the Turks and Caicos. There's an English Springer Spaniel in need of a C-section.

3:30 a.m.

Rose, the Springer with the bad timing, is on the surgery table, her owner peering in anxiously from the observation window. Kampschmidt can empathize. "I love my pets, and care for them and worry about them," he says, "and wonder if I am making the right decisions, the same as anyone else would."

Rose develops uterine inertia after her second pup is born with a large umbilical hernia. The pup has to be euthanized. A C-section is the only way to save the four remaining puppies, and Kampschmidt extracts the healthy stragglers. One by one the vet tech dries them with sterile towels, clears their mouths with a bulb syringe, and places them in an incubator to stay warm. Once Rose awakens and starts to nurse, the new family is sent home. Kampschmidt follows suit, returning to bed at 4:30.

7:30 a.m.

Given his early-morning ministrations, Kampschmidt sleeps in later than his usual 6 a.m., then showers, shaves, and sits down for breakfast — oatmeal or Egg Beaters. Then he grabs a sack lunch that Ann, his wife of 22 years, prepared, and heads out.

9 a.m.

The late start means no traffic on Kampschmidt's half-hour or so commute in his Hybrid Toyota SUV. He starts his day checking on hospitalized animals and pulling lab results off the fax machine. "The doctors all have hospitalized cases that we may discuss at morning rounds or during the day," he says. "We practice as a team, and bounce things off of each other because we've got a lot of different backgrounds and experience."

Today's cases include a Chinese Shar-Pei severely wounded in a scuffle with a housemate, and a Flat-Coated Retriever whose intestines are blocked with towel shreds.

9:45 a.m.

Kampschmidt draws blood from Jay, a jet-setting Boston Terrier who's headed for England in a few months. The sample will be sent to Kansas State University's veterinary rabies laboratory, the only lab in the country authorized to give a rabies-titer clearance so Jay can prove he has an adequate level of rabies antibodies to avoid Britain's quarantine on dogs without recent vaccinations.

10:05 a.m.

Seven 7-week-old Rhodesian Ridgeback puppies await their first exams and vaccinations. “I’m looking for congenital defects the breeder may not have recognized,” such as heart murmurs, Kampschmidt says. He examines their skin, palpates hips, checks to see if teeth are properly aligned, and inspects eyes.

Kampschmidt also discusses worming. “Puppies can be born with roundworms and hookworms even though Mom is not shedding them,” he explains. Migrating through the placenta and their mother’s milk, “those parasites have learned to be very tricky in finding their way into the next generation.”

11:35 a.m.

Not every consult gets neatly tied up in a bow. Montana, a 4-year-old Shih Tzu, has some bizarre symptoms, which include constantly staring at his side. Is it colitis? Obsessive-compulsive disorder? A seizure disorder?

“It’s cases like these where I wish the dog could tell me what he’s thinking,” Kampschmidt says. “Unlike human medicine, there’s no protocol” for such complex cases, and owners need to know that expensive tests — such as an MRI or CAT scan — can come up empty. Because Montana has occasional diarrhea, and X-rays showed a lot of gas, Kampschmidt decides to treat him for colitis — for now.

12:45 p.m.

Early afternoons are Kampschmidt’s surgery time. The most common procedure among canine patients is teeth cleaning, this time for a Basset Hound with gum disease. Annual cleanings are recommended, but “for some Toy breeds, it needs to be every four to six months,” he says.

High-tech touches include an ultrasonic scaler. While the dog is under anesthesia, Kampschmidt also probes gum pockets and checks for cracked or broken teeth.

2:10 p.m.

After a spay, another dental surgery, and a few reproductive procedures on male dogs that can’t be described, it’s finally time to eat his sack lunch. It’s a chicken wrap, pistachios, Jell-O, and a Diet Coke.

2:20 p.m.

Switching from medicine to management, Kampschmidt works on employee performance reviews.

3:45 p.m.

Back in an exam room, Winston has a problem Kampschmidt sees a lot in his Bulldog patients: The breed’s characteristic corkscrew tail has grown inward, creating infection and an abscess. “Some need to have their tail amputated and the skin sewed back.” But first, Winston has his abscess cleaned and is started on antibiotics.

4:05 p.m.

Kampschmidt began his day bringing new lives into the world, and now it’s time to gently ease one out. Summer, a very old, thin Doberman Pinscher, has stopped eating and is very weak.

The owners had discussed euthanasia on a previous visit. “I don’t want to be the one who makes the decision, but I want to help guide them,” Kampschmidt says. “Some people may be willing to deal with more nursing care, and there are others who feel the dog is suffering. It’s a personal, individual decision.”

Today, the family decides that the frail dog they carried into the waiting room will not leave with them. Kampschmidt closes the door and gives them a few minutes to say goodbye.

6:10 p.m.

FedEx has picked up everything from medications for clients to stud-dog sperm contributions, the lab work is out, and all the hospitalized patients are comfortable for the night. Kampschmidt locks up and drives home.

7 p.m.

Dinner is on the table, and everyone discusses their day — to the extent that teenagers discuss anything. Erin, 16, says a kid set off a stink bomb near her in the hall. And the big news from Jordan, 18, is that the high school’s Les Miserables rehearsal turned into a group singing of “Bohemian Rhapsody” by Queen. Naturally, says Kampschmidt, “Mom and I gave our rendition.”

8 p.m.

We will rock you — or not. Kampschmidt’s day ends far more languidly than it began. He fires up the TiVo to watch the



latest episode of "Lost" and goes through the mail, both the old-fashioned and electronic kind.

10:15 p.m.

Kampschmidt finishes his crossword and calls it a night. The Frenchies, Toby and Lilly, ever flatulent, are kicked out of bed.

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