

## Generalists and Specialists

**Know how to find the right veterinarian for the job.**

*D. Caroline Coile, Ph.D.*

Max couldn't get up. He'd been fine the night before, but the next morning his rear legs wouldn't move. "He could still wag his tail, though," his owner, Betsy Richards, recalls. That was the beginning of a series of frantic calls to local veterinarians. They all gave her the same advice about the Miniature Dachshund: Max needed to go to the veterinary school at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Va. They suspected Max had a slipped disk and would need surgery that they could not provide. Richards, who lives in Roanoke, Va., did just that. "They were able to see my little Max almost immediately and he had a successful surgery. It was like going to the Mayo clinic. He had a team of surgeons and internists that followed him. The student assigned to him called me every morning to give me a progress report.

Not too long ago, Max may have been sentenced to permanent paralysis. The surgery and recovery he required are not something readily tackled by most general practitioners. And even a decade ago, not all dog owners would have been lucky enough to live near a veterinary school, where most specialists could be found. But today, not only are specialists found at veterinary teaching hospitals, but at a number of private specialty practices in larger cities.

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The general veterinarian is faced with a monumental challenge. She must be familiar with more than one species, in many cases not just dogs and cats, but also horses, sheep, lizards, birds, and whatever else walks, slithers, or flies into her clinic. She must be diagnostician, surgeon, critical-care doctor, behaviorist, nutritionist, dermatologist, dentist, radiologist, and well-care manager. Her day may include giving routine vaccinations, performing artificial insemination, racing against time to save an injured dog, setting a broken leg, removing a spleen, delivering puppies by Caesarean section, and trying to find out why a dog is losing its hair. It's a wonder she's not losing her own hair by the end of the day, but for many of these veterinarians, it's just this variety that keeps them looking forward to the next day on the job.

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