



Reflections from a House Call Veterinarian

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I've been a veterinarian for decades. Yes, I actually have a life outside the world of Piglet, the deaf blind pink puppy. I'm a wife and mom to people-children as well as dogs and birds. But long before any other identity, I was and still am a veterinarian. From the time I could answer the question, What do you want to be?, there was only one answer.

Early on in my veterinary career, a house call practice was the furthest thing from my mind. I was planning to be a specialist and I was going to work in a referral hospital with the latest high tech equipment and support staff. Little did I know, my extensive post graduate training was preparing me for a wild ride as a specialist, but not a mainstream specialist that would be certified by a battery of tests and other requirements. Instead, within only a few years of working in veterinary hospitals, on call beeper on my belt, I found myself driving around house to house in a white VW Jetta filled with veterinary supplies.

There were no fancy blood analyzers, no vet techs or receptionists, no x-ray or ultrasound, no computer, and certainly NO cell phone. But I had years of clinical experience, and a carefully crafted veterinary supply box which enabled me to do a thorough in-home physical exam and assessment of most dog and cat medical situations. I also carried a wide variety of medications which I dispensed as needed. Hospital backup has always been an option which enables me to provide full service veterinary care to all of my patients.

Back then, the house call idea was not trending. There was only one other vet doing house calls in my area when I ventured out. Admittedly, I was skeptical about practicing medicine on a kitchen counter, on a living room floor, in a bathroom sink, or outside in a backyard. But my clients loved the personal attention, relaxed tone, and custom care they received from their house call vet. So much so, that in a matter of 6 months, I had established my business model and built a client base that has sustained my house call practice for 29 years.

There are definite negatives to the house call line of work. It doesn't happen often, but I remember each of those instances when I arrived at an appointment to find a frantic client in the driveway saying over and over, "He always shows up at 5:00!", or "She was just in the house", as I watched the dog racing off to another part of the planet. I have explored cellars, crawled around in dust under beds, and searched more cluttered closets and laundry rooms looking for cats than I care to admit. One cat blended completely into the stone cellar wall. I happened to notice her beautiful orange owl-like eyes staring at me as I moved past her. Her sister cat didn't appear until hours after I had left the house. A sense of humor is a necessary requirement to change a potentially aggravating situation into a positive visit even without the patient in attendance.

There are also those unrealistic clients who think it's a good idea to leave their nanny in charge of their aggressive dogs without a word of warning. Or cases where the client misjudges the severity of the medical condition and thinks that because they have to be at work, a house call is appropriate for their dog who needs urgent surgery or critical in-hospital care. Sadly, I have

arrived at houses where I've been alone with animals for their last breaths. Fortunately, this is not a regular occurrence.

I've always traveled to house calls with my own dogs in my car or van. When my children were very young, they would occasionally join us. The kids knew the routine at certain houses where they would watch TV, eat breakfast with my clients, and even discuss world news topics. The flexibility of a house call practice allowed me to take off an hour to go to my kid's school music concerts, class presentations and parties, doctor appointments, playgroups, and after school activities. This was a great luxury in the early days. I can't imagine missing the absolute delight of nursery school pickups. Now, as my kids are grown up, my dog rescue work has led to an accumulation of many adopted dogs of my own. My van has turned into their home away from home.

Once the limitations of a house call are understood, I have the most interesting, enjoyable, and sometimes hilarious experiences visiting my patients in their own homes. I get to see the absurd setups people concoct for their new puppies, meet the in-laws, and learn about the most personal aspects of my client's lives, all while giving a rabies vaccine to their dog. I get to recommend covering beautiful wood floors with cheap yoga mats to give old arthritic dogs better non-slip footing, and find danger zones where a simple gate will be life saving for an older blind pet.

Being the veterinarian for long dog and cat chapters, I also watch families grow. It's really exciting when my client's kids have graduated from college, get married, have babies, get pets, and call me to be their veterinarian! And some of my clients have known me since I was a kid obsessed with becoming a veterinarian. Taking care of my own kindergarten teacher's pets has always been one of my favorite house calls. It's nice to see someone who always brings back happy childhood memories.

Visiting pets in their homes, many of my long time clients have become very good friends. It's hard to avoid special relationships with people I have worked with so intimately for so long. After all, for most, there is nothing more dear than a dog, cat, or other pet. I am the one to guide my clients through the happy, emotional, and eventually heartbreaking stages of their pet's lives. It is a partnership that starts on a joyous day and inevitably ends in sadness. And then the cycle begins again.

While my professional life took a very different path than I had originally planned, my career as a house call vet has been rewarding in ways I never could have imagined. As it turns out, I am a specialist in offering custom veterinary care to my very special patients and their very special people. Looking back, I wouldn't change a thing.