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When Fido and Muffy start to squint Veterinary ophthalmologists specialize in animal sight problems

Judy Richter, Special to The Chronicle
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Cynthia Cook is an ophthalmologist, but she doesn't ask her patients to read the familiar chart starting with the big letter "E" at the top.

Asking them to sit and stay is more like it, because she's also a veterinarian. Her patients range from dogs and cats to "everything with eyes that doesn't have opposable thumbs" -- nonhuman primates excepted, she said.

Cook is the co-owner of Veterinary Vision, a specialized practice with offices in San Carlos and San Francisco. She works with two other eye vets and seven staff members, including two licensed veterinary technicians.

She estimates that about 75 percent of her patients are dogs and 20 percent are cats. The remaining 5 percent are anything from birds, horses and other pets to animals at the San Francisco Zoo.

Animals can have the same kinds of eye problems as humans, but since they can't communicate with words, their owners must be vigilant for signs of trouble.

If the animal can't easily find his toys, for example, his depth perception might be off. Squinting or rubbing the eyes can be other signs of problems.

Changes in the appearance of the eyes, such as cloudiness, redness or tearing, are other danger signals. Cataracts are one of the most common eye problems in dogs, she said, usually appearing between ages 3 and 12, depending on the breed. Cataracts tend to cause a "rapid onset of behavior changes" that can include bumping into things and not retrieving favorite toys in familiar surroundings, she said.

Other problems, such as dry eyes or glaucoma, might develop more slowly.

Cook has worked with Guide Dogs for the Blind, making sure that its dogs have good vision before they undergo their extensive training.

She also has worked with breeders through the Canine Eye Registration Foundation, a group of owners and breeders who want to eliminate inherited eye diseases in purebred dogs through a

national registry. The foundation registers dogs that members of the American College of Veterinary Ophthalmologists, like Cook, have certified as free of inherited eye diseases.

Cocker spaniels, for example, are subject to all eye diseases. Popular breeds like poodles, labs and golden retrievers are more likely to have genetic eye problems because there's more possibility of a concentration of genes through selective breeding.

Not all problems involve genetics, per se. Breeds with large, prominent eyes, like Boston bull terriers, are vulnerable to eye injury and infection. Breeds that have fur over their eyes can have problems not only because the fur can be irritating but also because it can prevent owners from easily detecting trouble signs. "Trim it. Get it out of there," Cook said.

Most of her patients are referred by vets in general practice.

The initial exam, which costs \$93.50, involves checking eye pressure and tear function and looking at the front of the eye with a slit lamp and at the back of the eye, or retina, with an ophthalmoscope, the same instrument used by eye doctors for people.

The retina also is a window to other problems, such as diabetes, hypertension, feline leukemia and feline immunodeficiency virus.

The exam isn't painful, but it can be intimidating, so Cook likes having the owner there to help calm the animal. Nearly all small animals will tolerate the exam easily, but horses need to be sedated.

Once a problem is diagnosed, it can be treated medically or surgically. Veterinary Vision has a fully equipped operating room where procedures include cataract surgery and lens implantation.

Cook opened her San Carlos office in November, moving there from San Mateo, where Veterinary Vision was established 15 years ago. She has had her San Francisco office for about nine years. She also serves as a research consultant to the pharmaceutical industry and universities.

Requirements for becoming a veterinary ophthalmologist are similar to the education and training required for human medical specialties. Four years of pre-vet training are followed by four years of vet school, one or two years of internship and three years of residency.

Becoming board-certified by the American College of Veterinary Ophthalmologists requires a review of qualifications followed by a four-day series of tests. Only about 250 vets nationwide have achieved board certification.

They include Cook, who has been certified since 1986; her business partner, Albert Mughannam; and their Veterinary Vision colleague, Carol Szymanski. Cook is on the college's board of directors as a regent.

Cook began her career in general veterinary practice in Southern California, where she worked for two years. After meeting a veterinary ophthalmologist, she decided to pursue that specialty at North Carolina State University, where she also earned a master's degree in toxicology. She also earned a doctorate in medical cell biology and anatomy from the University of North Carolina.

While in North Carolina, she became interested in using animals to learn about birth defects in human eyes, especially those caused by fetal alcohol syndrome.

Her work led to a National Institutes of Health grant to study fetal alcohol syndrome and teach veterinary medicine at the UCSF School of Medicine for six years. During that time she also was in private practice.

She decided to go into clinical practice full time and bought the San Mateo practice from a part-time vet.

The mother of 17-year-old twin daughters, she lives in Half Moon Bay. She has a Norwich terrier that usually goes to work with her and that she trains in competition agility, as well as two Bedlington terriers.

For more information about Veterinary Vision and animal eye problems, visit www.veterinaryvision.com.

Resources

Offices with board-certified veterinary ophthalmologists in the Bay Area:

Several counties

Bay Area Mobile Eye Clinic, (510) 279-1020 or (415) 279-1020.

Alameda County

Animal Eye Care, 1612 Washington Blvd., Fremont. (510) 623-0444

Contra Costa County

Contra Costa Animal Eye Clinic, 2100 Monument Blvd., Suite 7, Pleasant Hill. (925) 827-2257

Animal Eye Specialists, 10324 San Pablo Ave., El Cerrito. (510) 559-1755

Marin County

Eye Care for Animals, 5796 Paradise Drive, Corte Madera. (707) 571-8442

San Francisco

Veterinary Vision, 1333 Ninth Ave., San Francisco. (800) 427-5367

San Mateo County

Veterinary Vision, 201 Industrial Road, Suite 100, San Carlos. (650) 551-1115

Animal Eye Doctor, Village Square Veterinary Hospital, 884 Portola Road, Portola Valley. (650) 321-1218 or (650) 851-3244

Santa Clara County

Animal Eye Specialists of San Jose, 5440 Thornwood Drive, Suite H, San Jose. (408) 363-8066

Animal Eye Specialists of San Jose, 911 Dell Ave., Campbell. (408) 871-2100

Solano County

Animal Ophthalmology Service, 825 Davis St., Suite A, Vacaville. (707) 449-8092

Sonoma County

Dr. Sylvia Neumann, 5948 Russell Lane, Forestville. (707) 887-7787

Eye Care for Animals, 3070 Cleveland Ave., Santa Rosa. (707) 571-8442

Source: American College of Veterinary Ophthalmologists, www.acvo.org.

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