



It's a Vet's Life

Love animals? We've got the perfect job for you...

By Shantini Harriet

Remember the movie "Dr. Doolittle", starring Eddie Murphy as a vet who could talk to the animals? Well, veterinarians aren't normally quite as immersed in their profession as the good doctor but they do require good if not better bedside manners than their medical counterparts.

But for the city folk, the vet is just someone you take your pet for jabs. Though true to a point, veterinary clinics do much more these days than ensure our pets get their shots. Apart from general treatment of animals, many animal clinics offer a wide variety of services in advanced medical, dental and surgical care including insulin injections, root canals, hip replacements, cataract extractions and pacemakers. Some go the extra mile to offer room and board for animals with either special needs or while their owners are away.

But veterinary medicine isn't just about the care for domestic pets. Its scope includes exotic, production animals or livestock and wildlife. It requires the acquisition and application of scientific knowledge in multiple disciplines and uses technical skills directed at disease prevention in both domestic and wild animals.

Furthermore, it also helps safeguard human health through the careful monitoring of animal health.

It is widely believed that veterinary school is the hardest to gain acceptance into among the various medical professions. The fact that they are expected to diagnose and treat diseases in a variety of different species without benefit of verbal communication with their patients, probably has something to do with it. Indeed, among medical practitioners, veterinarians are routinely ranked the most intelligent and trustworthy.

Becoming a vet doesn't guarantee fame or fortune but with a steady annual growth of 5% in the field, hard work and commitment can pay off eventually. One such success story is about a little boy who grew up from the age of five in the company of his father's 'patients', knowing exactly what he wanted to do for the rest of his life, and continues to challenge and improve himself for the betterment of his chosen field.

Dr. Amilan Sivagurunathan made his mark in history mid-last year when he assisted doctors from South Africa perform the world's first cataract surgery on an orangutan at the Matang Wildlife



Centre in Sarawak. As an up and coming veterinarian, he graduated from South Africa with a degree in veterinarian science in 2002 and spent over a year there as a wildlife game ranger honing his skills. Brimming with enthusiasm and drive, he returned to Malaysia and has spent the last six years exactly where he discovered his calling... his father's practice, the Animal Medical Centre in Kuala Lumpur.

Though a far cry from his days as a game ranger, it is here in blissful 'domesticity' that Dr Amilan achieved his biggest milestone to date and developed a new passion for ophthalmology. His future plans include a two-year specialty correspondence course in ophthalmology with an Australian university and an overseas Masters degree in South Africa.

A day in the life of a vet in the city isn't as smooth sailing or routine as it may sound. As an emergency care centre veterinarian, Dr Amilan's day is filled with constant activity with everything happening all at once. In fact, he says, "To choose this field not only do you need to have a love for animals and enjoy working with people but the hours are long, and commitment and hard work are very important especially when you're building a foundation."

He further adds, "If anyone is opting for veterinarian medicine as a career path, participate in vet work by maybe volunteering your time during school holidays to get a feel for the scope of work involved and the energy level needed for the job." According to Dr Amilan, graduates looking to establish their own private practices should work under an experienced vet for about 5 years before striking out on their own. This will ensure that they get the relevant exposure and experience needed to run their own practices.

Though veterinary medicine programs are offered at many universities abroad, at present, the only institution of higher learning in Malaysia offering undergraduate and postgraduate courses in veterinary sciences is Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). The Doctor of Veterinary Medicine (DVM) programme requires five years undergraduate studies and off-campus practical training.

The scope of veterinary science is very wide, of course, and there are numerous areas of specialisation. Veterinary specialisation has become more common in recent years in areas including anesthesiology, behavior, dermatology, emergency and critical care, internal medicine, cardiology, ophthalmology, oncology, neurology, radiology and surgery.

A career in veterinarian medicine probably isn't for the faint hearted nor do you need to have a talent for talking to the animals but it does help if you're a good 'listener' instead... you never know, the animals might just answer back.



Dr Amilan assisting doctors perform the world's first cataract surgery on an orangutan at the Matang Wildlife Centre in Sarawak.

Pathways to higher education in Veterinary Medicine

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