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Cutting-edge pet medicine

New veterinary facility has wide array of specialists

By Kimberly Matas
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Specialists in the “ologys” — neurology, dermatology and radiology — not to mention experts in orthopedic surgery, internal medicine, valley fever and critical care all can be found at one Northwest Side medical practice. All a patient needs to get in the door is a fur coat and a preoccupation with self-grooming.

Veterinary Specialty Center of Tucson, 4909 N. La Cañada Drive, just south of River Road, opened as a small-animal practice in July. Pet owners are referred to the center by their primary-care veterinarians, though the hospital is open 24 hours, seven days a week for emergencies.

James Boulay, who specializes in orthopedic surgery, started the center with surgeon Barbara Gores. He has practiced in Tucson for seven years and Gores has been in town six years. They see 10 dogs a week for knee-reconstruction surgeries. Depending on the knee problem, surgeries can cost from \$1,200 for a small dog to \$3,000 for a large breed. Clients from all over the Southwest bring their pets to Tucson for orthopedic surgery and other specialty services offered by the center. One owner flew in his dog from Turkey so Boulay could perform hip-replacement surgery. And the surgeons are working with a colleague in Zurich, Switzerland, to develop new reconstruction procedures for hip replacement surgery.

The work done at Veterinary Specialty Center is “very much reflecting what is cutting edge in people,” Gores said. She and Boulay attend medical conferences in human limb alignment because animals have much the same problems that people do and many of the scientific breakthroughs in human joint replacement were tested on animals first, Gores said. “We do things that are only available here,” Boulay said. “We were the first clinic in the Southwest to do non-cemented hip replacement.”

Earlier this month, Boulay said, the center’s neurologist, Peter Gordon — one of only 130 veterinary neurologists in the country — performed Tucson’s first brain surgery on a pet when he removed a tumor from a cat. “People in Tucson don’t realize Tucson probably has some of the most advanced veterinary medicine in the country,” Boulay said. Last week Karen and Dan Noerr of Sierra Vista brought their 7-year-old German shepherd, Gretchen, to Boulay for knee surgery to repair a torn anterior cruciate ligament. The Noerrs have owned dogs for nearly 40 years and said the animals are like their children. They’ve financed two knee surgeries for their mastiff. “We go to a very good vet in Sierra Vista,” Dan Noerr said, “and they recommended this clinic and there really wasn’t a satisfactory clinic between here and the border. If you’re going to spend that kind of money, why not drive another 30 miles? “What we’ve seen so far has been very impressive,” he said.

The state-of-the-art, nearly 10,000-square-foot, two-story hospital is centered on an intensive-care unit. There is a self-contained nurse’s station for the veterinary technicians to observe patients. A crash cart complete with heart defibrillator is parked nearby in case of emergencies. There is an isolation room, three operating rooms, two stations for performing dental procedures, a laboratory, a prep room for surgery; ultrasound equipment is available to take a noninvasive peek inside an ailing pet. A room is dedicated to a large CT scanner to detect spinal and brain injuries and tumors. It is the same model that is used at Tucson Medical Center, Boulay said. A small room is set aside for endoscopies when the internal medicine vets want to take a look at an animal’s stomach from the inside out.

And the center’s VirtuRad X-ray system is filmless, allowing the e-mailing of digital images to primary-care vets and consulting doctors or burning CDs of X-rays for pet owners. The technology allows its users to adjust the exposure on the image, eliminating the need for multiple retakes, thereby exposing their animal patients and staff to less radiation. Images from the CT scanner and ultrasound equipment are linked to VirtuRad, as well. Veterinary Specialty Center is the first clinic in Tucson with a VirtuRad system, though an orthopedics specialist for humans soon will use the system, said VirtuRad founder Dr. Hirsch Handmaker. “We have to use all the same equipment they use in people,” Boulay said. “This is kind of the trend in veterinary medicine today really reflecting what is happening on the human side,” Gores said. “You can do smaller specialty hospitals ... this is a way you can bring specialty treatment to pet owners.” “We want to do not just state-of-the-art medicine, but really good quality care. We have a staff that’s incredibly experienced and committed.”

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