

VETTING: The Making of a Veterinarian

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Chapter 1 - First Solo Weekend - West Seneca, June 1976

The first hour flowed by smoothly. People who make early morning appointments on Saturday generally have other plans for the day. They are anxious to get in and out without delay. Only small talk was necessary. At 9:15, Paula, a veterinary technician, appeared with an ashen look on her face. Paula was a registered nurse who had abandoned the ranks of human medicine to work with pets.

“We have a hit-by-car coming right over. Sounds bad,” whispered Paula.

“OK,” I responded pretending to be calm. “Keep Exam 2 open and set up for an IV in the treatment room. Let me know as soon as it arrives.”

My thoughts were spinning out of control during the next office call; the possible scenarios were endless. Thankfully, the cat in this room only needed suture removal. Even I could handle that while distracted.

After a mere five days on the job as a licensed veterinarian, it was my turn to handle a weekend alone. That meant seeing patients on Saturday morning and dealing with any emergencies for the balance of the weekend. In this suburban practice south of Buffalo, New York, two appointments were booked every fifteen minutes on Saturday morning, twice the normal pace. The appointment schedule was always full on Saturday despite dismal economic times. Recently both Bethlehem and Republic Steel had shut their doors and were in the process of mothballing plants that were located a few short miles from our clinic. Many thousands of blue-collar workers had been laid off, and everyone in the community was devastated by the closing of these once enormous plants. Our communities were suddenly becoming the regions that helped coin a new national term - the Rust Belt.

As a recent graduate, the idea of tackling Saturday morning appointments alone was formidable. A license to practice medicine is in a way similar to a license to drive a car. Every new driver is qualified to drive. However, as each stop sign or bend in the road approaches, new drivers still have to think about when to accelerate, when to reach for the brake, and how to steer through a turn. Practicing medicine is no different. The new graduate has to think

about what questions to ask, what diseases to consider, what medications to use, and at what dosage. The new veterinarian reaches for reference material to double check even the simplest decisions. On top of that, one is expected to chat politely with the owner and pet the patient, even though most of his or her brain is lost in some medical jungle. In six months time most of these things would become instinctive, just as the experienced driver is comfortable behind the wheel, but here I was, on my own for the first time, and not feeling comfortable about it at all.

The appointment book revealed that there would be 32 pets to examine by noon. My personal approach to stressful situations has always been to create strange ways to track progress, especially when the road ahead appears hopeless. On a desk between the two exam rooms, I placed a scratch pad with the number 32 scribbled near the top. After each office call, I would cross that number out and write down the next lower one. This approach to stress was a silly idiosyncrasy, but it worked for me. By reminding myself of bits of progress or accomplishment, the task ahead seemed more reachable.

Before the next pet was settled into Exam 1, the commotion down the hall told me that my first solo trauma case had just arrived. On the table in Exam 2, a petite young beagle named Susie lay almost lifeless on a makeshift plywood stretcher. Rapid shallow breathing and pink foam at the corner of her mouth confirmed my worst fears. The owner was sobbing, trying to say something, but all my peripheral vision noted was a tall heavyset fellow with dark hair. My stethoscope revealed a faint but racing heartbeat. The dog's mouth was open revealing ghost white gums. There was little question that Susie was hemorrhaging internally and deep in shock.

I felt tears collect in the corners of my eyes. Fate had dealt a wicked blow. My family had raised and bred beagles during my high school years, and all I could see on the table was one of our six-month old pups from years earlier. My first unsuccessful treatment would hurt all the more.

"Take her straight to treatment and start an IV," I said hoping that my voice was more of a bark than a whimper. Paula and another assistant carried the stretcher out of the room and raced towards the back of the hospital.

"Susie is bleeding badly internally, and she may not make it," I said to Mr. Pascal, the owner, as I started towards the door, avoiding eye contact.

"We need to give her fluids and shock medication as rapidly as possible to try to bring her blood pressure up. I'll have a technician monitor her constantly and check on her myself

between each appointment. We'll do all we can, and I'll call you at home as soon as her condition changes in either direction."

Mr. Pascal was trying to mumble between sobs about the accident as he headed out the other door.

Paula already had a catheter in a vein and was hooking up the IV when I arrived in the treatment room. I injected a vial of fast-acting cortisone to try to counteract the shock, and then I headed for the next office call, leaving Paula on vigil. Between each exam, I scooted back to the treatment area to check on Susie's progress. Unfortunately, the heartbeat became steadily fainter, slower, and shallower. I had no access to whole blood transfusion equipment, and emergency surgery was simply not feasible in most veterinary settings in 1976. Unfortunately my embryonic clinical judgment was correct. Susie passed away within thirty minutes of arrival.

Susie had arrived as the number 22 appeared on the scratch pad monitoring my progress. Before the number 19 appeared, she was gone. I knew it was time to pick up the phone and call Mr. Pascal to deliver the bad news. It was time for me to experience the pain of that call for the first time. After avoiding the inevitable through two more exams, I could procrastinate no longer. As I picked up the phone, my heart seemed to race faster than Susie's had only an hour earlier.

"Mr. Pascal, I'm really sorry, but Susie didn't make it. The internal damage was just too great to reverse. She never regained consciousness and passed on a few minutes ago. All I can assure you is that she probably felt little pain and never knew what happened."

"This is all my fault Doc," Mr. Pascal said between sobs. "I was working in the yard and apparently the gate didn't latch behind me. We live on a four-lane highway. She never had a chance. I didn't know she was out of the yard until the brakes squealed. I have no one to blame but myself."

I had no idea how to respond, but somehow managed to say with a crackling voice, "Accidents happen, Mr. Pascal. Don't be too hard on yourself. It's very obvious that you deeply loved her. I'm certain she knew that." I paused as long as possible before continuing. "I know this is a terrible time to ask this question, but since we close at noon, I have to ask now. Do you want us to take care of Susie's body? She would be buried on a nearby farm unless you have other preferences."

"No," he responded with a snuffle. "Our family owns property south of the city. She loved it down there. All I can do for her now is bury her there myself."

“Well,” I said, “That’s fine if you feel up to it. Will you be able to pick up her body this morning?”

“No. I have something to do first. Is there any possible way to pick her up tomorrow?” he asked.

“Well, I have one cat in the hospital that will be staying all weekend. Could you meet me here at nine o’clock tomorrow morning?”

I knew the boss would not be happy if Mr. Pascal failed to show up and never paid his bill. But the voice on the other end of the phone seemed so sincere. I was willing to take that risk. When I told Paula that Mr. Pascal would be picking up the body in the morning, she gave me a strange look. I assumed that she too worried that my leniency might lead to trouble when the boss came back on Monday morning.

I somehow managed to stumble through the remaining appointments. It was about 1:15 when I finally crossed out the number 1 on the scratch pad. A beautiful June day waited outside, but as we left, all of the employees seemed unusually quiet as we headed for our cars. I assumed that they all were upset at being kept at work longer than usual. I was mentally exhausted and thankful that none of them complained out loud.

On Sunday morning, at nine o’clock sharp, while I was giving an injection to the hospitalized cat, the door bell rang. I started up a small flight of steps to the front office to answer the bell, and then I froze dead in my tracks. Through the glass door I could see Mr. Pascal. He was looking off to the side and could not see me. I stepped back out of sight as my heart began to race many times faster than yesterday.

For the first time, I realized that I never really looked at Mr. Pascal the day before. The face at the door was the same, but the entire picture had changed. The man at the door was over six feet tall with dark greasy hair. Both huge arms sported gnarly tattoos. A rounded belly shaded half of a gigantic belt buckle. Sunlight gleamed off the handle of a pistol in a holster hanging from his belt. Behind him in the parking lot sat a huge motorcycle with a black leather jacket draped over the seat. Something large and rectangular was strapped on the back.

I couldn’t believe how unobservant I had been. I wrestled between calling the police and keeping my word to this man. Common sense was telling me that I was alone in the building and I should call the police. Over and over the whimpering telephone voice that loved Susie so much played back in my head. But I also remembered the worried look on Paula’s face, and even with closed eyes, I could picture the pistol that I had failed to see

yesterday reflected in her eyes. When the bell sounded again, I drew in a deep breath, held it for a moment, exhaled, and headed for the door.

The giant grizzly figure with bloodshot eyes and tear streaks on both cheeks stepped in through the door.

“Thanks Doc,” he said throwing both arms around me. “I really appreciate you meeting me this morning.”

I could feel the loss for his pet and the handle of his pistol at the same time.

“Can you help me for a minute? I built Susie a casket last night.”

“Sure,” I replied, too confused to say anything else and I followed him out to his bike.

Together, we untied a delicately oiled oak casket and carried it in, placing it gently on the very table where Susie had lain 24 hours earlier. I stared in amazement as he loosened a brass latch and opened the piano-hinged box. The inside was lined with red satin velvet, with perfectly pleated ruffles on all sides. It was a miniature coffin in every sense of the word.

“You built this?” I gasped in amazement. Somehow the pistol became a bit less threatening. “It’s beautiful!”

“Yeah... I was up most of the night. It’s the only way I could try to make this up to Susie.”

I brought Susie’s lifeless body into the room and spent several minutes helping Mr. Pascal position her as comfortably as possible in the exquisite chamber. Then he handed me cash to pay his bill. When I turned to get change, he insisted on leaving the balance. I accepted it gracefully, telling him it would find its way to the employee coffee fund. We carried Susie carefully out the door and strapped the casket onto the back of the bike.

“Thanks again Doc for trying your best,” he said as he pulled up a thick zipper on the black leather jacket.

The motorcycle roared out of the parking lot heading south on the highway. I would never see or hear from Mr. Pascal again, yet I would always remember the lesson learned. I never again judged an owner’s level of attachment to their pet based on a first impression. As the motorcycle rounded a bend and disappeared from sight, I could feel the warm morning breeze drying unnoticed tears on the side of my face.

Continue on to read some of the comments people are making about the book!

At sometime in his or her life almost every young pet owner imagines a career as a veterinarian. Very, very few ever get to achieve that dream. Through Dr. Freyburger's experiences, we have a chance to know the joys and the sorrows of small animal medicine.

**Alan Bergman
Kenmore East Senior High School Class of 1969
Instructor at Hosei University - Tokyo, Japan**

The lessons of life choices are hidden within the covers of Vetting. Dr. Pete Freyburger shows us how he tried, failed, succeeded, and triumphed, while serving his community, his family, his friends and animals. The humor and passion that Pete shows as he learns about life and how his choices will frame his future can help all of us to lead the life we want.

**Barbara Carr
Executive Director
SPCA Serving Erie County**

Eventually, with any group of veterinarians, the conversation gets around to pets, clients and cases. Pete could always remember better stories than I could. And now he has written some of those for all to enjoy, and shared his personal journey as well. Aah, even better!

**John C. Laurie, DVM
Retired
Orchard Park Veterinary Medical Center**

This story is more than a personal account of Pete's life experiences and loving work with animals. Anyone who reads this book will truly know the caring man who has devoted his life to his family and his interesting patients. And, just as important, the reader will come to understand the challenges, joys, sorrow, excitement and rewards experienced by all who dedicate their heart and soul to the wonderful Profession of Veterinary Medicine.

**Joseph E. Savarese, D.V.M.
Professor and Chair, Veterinary Technology Department
Medaille College, Buffalo, New York**

Every veterinarian who has joined this profession has heard hundreds of sad stories from the wannabes who did not complete their quest for the DVM degree. For many of us, that achievement fulfilled a calling while leading us to a rewarding career. The public as well as the newbies just joining this great profession can all learn a wonderful perspective and ethic from Dr. Pete's humble, heart-warming storytelling. The world and its animal kingdom are in a better place because of Pete and the decisions he made as he shares with us his life's experiences.

**James F. Wilson, DVM, JD
Author, Teacher, Veterinarian & Coach
Yardley, Pennsylvania**