

# Section 1

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## Introduction

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# The Role of the Veterinary Technician in Exotic Animal Medicine

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Welcome to the world of exotic animal medicine! For those who practice it, it is the variety that provides the spice to veterinary life. In a practice that sees exotics, it is not uncommon to see a dog for vaccines, a diabetic cat, an iguana with metabolic bone disease, a ferret for a physical examination, a rabbit with hair loss, and a feather-picking cockatoo all in one day. The challenge for those in this field lies in the vast differences in the species seen (Figure 1.1).

In the world of veterinary medicine, an exotic animal is any animal that isn't a dog, cat, horse, or cow. Exotic animals include wildlife species, animals commonly used in research that are kept as pets, and animals native to various regions of the world such as South America, Australia, and Africa. Owners of "pocket pets" such as mice, rats, gerbils, and hamsters commonly seek veterinary care for their pets.

There are several scenarios in which a technician faced with exotics may find this book helpful. For instance, a technician might take a job in a practice that sees exotics but she knows little about them because she graduated before exotics became popular pets. Another technician may work for a veterinarian who wants to add exotics to the practice but doesn't have hands-on experience with them. Alternatively, a technician who finds employment at a zoological park or works with a wildlife rehabilitator may want to brush up on current ideas about exotics. While this book does not cover zoo species specifically, knowledge of exotic animals, their treatment, and their care is desirable in the zoo environment.

It is essential that a technician who works for a veterinarian who would like to add exotics to the practice help the veterinarian understand how the practice will need to change to accommodate these species. One must accept the fact that a fifteen- or twenty-minute appointment will not suffice. In many cases appointments of thirty minutes or longer are

required. Because husbandry and nutrition are typically the two most common causes of illness in exotics, a thorough history in these areas is essential. Furthermore, more time may be required to perform a physical examination due to the delicate nature of some of the species. In many cases it is necessary to allow adequate time to educate the owner about how to keep his/her pet healthy.

The front office staff must be knowledgeable and interested in exotic pets because they will be the first people the pet owner sees in the office. The worst thing that can happen for a snake owner, for example, is to step up to the front desk and see the receptionist recoil in horror. Not only is this behavior unprofessional, but it also calls into question the knowledge of the doctors. Likewise, if a receptionist does not know the difference between a macaw and a cockatoo, it may give the impression that the clinic doesn't see many birds.

Housing is another consideration in the decision to treat exotic pets. Because many pocket pets are prey



*Figure 1.1. A technician drawing blood from a skunk. (Photo courtesy of Ryan Cheek.)*

animals, their housing in relation to that of dogs and cats must be considered. For example, a rabbit should not be caged where a cat patient can watch it. This alone can create undue added stress for a rabbit patient, which is already stressed by being in the hospital environment. An exotic pet should not have to add the fear of being eaten to its worries during a hospital stay.

While the average animal hospital has most of the necessary equipment needed to treat exotics, some items will need to be purchased. For example, a gram scale is required to weigh many of the very small patients. Microtainer blood collection tubes are also essential. A list of equipment that is useful in exotic practices appears in Appendix 12.

The technician's role in exotic animal medicine is the same as it is in small or large animal medicine. One of the most important roles is that of a meticulous history taker. As each chapter illustrates, a simple history will not do. Detailed questions must be asked about how and where the pet was acquired. Wild-caught species can have different health problems than those raised in captivity. How the pet is housed is vitally important, and this means not only asking what it is housed in but the cage size, construction, substrate used, and where it is kept in the house. If the animal is not brought in the cage it is housed in, the technician, after gathering the history, should be able to create a mental picture of what the cage at home looks like.

The same is true for gathering adequate information about the pet's diet. It is not good enough to ask what is fed, because that may not be what is consumed. For example, an owner may report that his Amazon parrot's daily diet is made up of fruits, vegetables, and seeds. When asked how much of each is consumed each day, the answer may be mostly seeds, which is an inadequate diet.

In many cases, owners of exotics may have been misinformed about their pets' care by the pet shops where the pets were purchased. Although some pet shop employees are knowledgeable, many simply do not know the correct information about the species they sell. In addition, an owner may have read information from a less than reputable source. The veterinary technician should be able to give owners the correct information about husbandry and nutrition without chastising them for their mistakes. Many owners honestly may not know that what they were doing was wrong. They may have obtained books that are not written by reputable sources or found information on the Internet that is inaccurate. Clients value information about how to keep their pets healthy, and

their veterinary clinic should be the source of that information.

The technician can also provide valuable information about what type of exotic pet a client should buy. For example, an iguana is considered to be a difficult reptile to keep because its housing and nutrition requirements are demanding. A bearded dragon may be a better choice. A parakeet may be a better choice than a macaw for a first-time bird owner, because macaws can be noisy and messy. The topic of conservation of species is important here as well. New exotic pet owners should be encouraged to acquire captive-raised species rather than wild-caught if possible. In many exotic species, the numbers in the wild are diminishing. This is especially true of many avian species. Most exotic species that are desirable as pets can be obtained from captive-raised sources.

One should never underestimate the strength of the human-animal bond that exists between owners and their exotic pets. An owner can be as bonded to a mouse or a snake as another owner is to a dog or horse. Just as one should never assume what an owner is willing to spend for medical care on dogs, cats, and horses, one should never assume what exotic pet owners will spend for their pets. It is not uncommon to see a devoted owner spend hundreds of dollars for a surgical procedure for a pet rat.

Some veterinary practices see primates and venomous species. Because of the dangers to humans, these veterinarians typically set "rules of engagement" regarding the care and treatment of these animals. For example, the veterinarian may only see a primate or venomous snake after hours, when all employees and clients are gone. Likewise, a veterinarian may require that an owner of a venomous snake provide in-date antivenin along with the snake.

Some veterinarians will not see large exotic cats due to safety concerns. And yes, there are people who have permits to keep them. Others will see these animals on the owner's premises as long as handling equipment, such as squeeze cages, is provided. It is important that all employees know the clinic's protocol for seeing primates, venomous species, and large cats.

Every state has different laws regarding which species are legal to keep as pets and which are not. It is up to the veterinarian to decide whether she will see animals that may in fact be illegal pets, and to communicate this information to the technicians and other staff.

Continuing education is an important part of a graduate technician's professional enhancement, and its importance in exotic medicine cannot be overemphasized. What is known about the care and treatment

of exotic animals is forever changing as more and more is learned. What was described as the proper diet for a particular lizard one year may be something different the next. More and more drugs are being tried in exotics. This type of cutting-edge information is often presented at conferences and in professional publications. This presents an added challenge to practices that see exotic animals because information is forever changing.

In response to this challenge, we have assembled here for the veterinary technician a survey of the most recent practices in the area of exotic animal care. Exotic animal medicine provides a veterinary technician with the opportunity to use all of his skills and knowledge in a way that has a direct benefit to the practice and to the patients. Enjoy!

