

Care factor

Running a referral hospital takes dedication and vision—two veterinary surgeons in this field explain all the complexities to
Kerryn Ramsey

ONCE A RARITY, VETERINARY REFERRAL HOSPITALS ARE NOW POPPING UP IN both cities and even major regional towns. More than 15 hospitals are operating throughout the country, and two qualified veterinarians who specialise in this field are not surprised at all.

“I think pets are more a part of the family now,” explains Dr James Radecki, hospital administrator of Small Animal Specialist Hospital (SASH) in North Ryde, Sydney. “People are willing to do more for their pets because of the link they have to the family. Pet insurance has also made some difference with usage increasing over the past five years.”

Dr Sam Snelling, director and surgeon of Advanced Vetcare in Kensington, Victoria, agrees. “It’s quite a routine thing now for people to insure their pets straight after they get them.” As a result, the number of specialised procedures are becoming more frequent.

Snelling, who has nearly 20 years under his belt as a veterinary surgeon, launched his referral hospital back in 2006 with his wife Majella. For the first 18 months, they employed just four staff, including Snelling as the single surgeon—but this visionary team could see the potential. “I built it as large and as well appointed as I could to encourage other specialists to join our practice down the track,” he explains.

“I built it as large and as well appointed as I could to encourage other specialists to join our practice down the track”

Dr Sam Snelling

Now the hospital comprises 48 staff including 15 vets in a two-level high-tech building. It’s a far cry from its original purpose—a 1970s science lab “with crappy old vinyl floor tiles and big benches with Bunsen burners and beaker racks”. The 1000-square-metre property was completely gutted and rebuilt. Inside, the hospital has a modern, minimalist look; its renovated workspace is used for medical and surgical procedures and to provide a 24-hour emergency and critical care service.

In the early stages, Snelling had a 10-year budget plan but he achieved this goal in a mere three years. “Its rapid growth took me by surprise,” says the surgeon who graduated in 1995 at the University

of Sydney. He spent a few years at various small-animal practices, and then moved to Melbourne in 1999 where he started an internship at the university, as well as a residency.

After graduating as a specialist surgeon in 2005, he could see the need for another referral centre in inner-city Melbourne. There were four animal hospitals in the city at that stage and, after Advanced Vetcare opened, three further referral centres popped up. Taking on such a challenge was slightly daunting, admits the surgeon, but his determination has made Advanced Vetcare a real success story.

SASH, meanwhile, is Sydney’s most recognisable veterinary referral hospital. It’s ably managed by Dr James Radecki, whose first job as a qualified vet was in Sydney’s eastern suburbs. When his then boss put his practices on the market, Radecki decided to take the plunge and bought one of them, also in the eastern suburbs.

In 2007, Radecki sold his portion of the practice and moved to SASH. “SASH originally started with about 25 staff with five vets and only a few services,” he recalls. Originally, his job involved being a part-time practice manager while doing emergency work but in 2010, he went into full-time practice management. “Over that time, I have seen the business



This page: Staff at the Small Animal Specialist Hospital in North Ryde have seen a rapid growth in demand for their services.

and hospital grow,” he says, referring to the 120 staff, including 50 vets. An array of new services has also been introduced, such as the first full-time dental service in NSW, Sydney’s only full-time dermatology service and soon Sydney’s first full-time specialist emergency service.

During this growth, Radecki still found time to complete a diploma in practice management with the University of New England partnerships, and is currently halfway through an MBA at the Macquarie Graduate School of Management

Small Animal Specialist Hospital is located in a corporate park and currently the services are separated into two different zones. The emergency surgery and medicine is located in one building, while a day surgery for ophthalmology, oncology, dermatology and dentistry is located in an adjoining building.

This sophisticated hospital is a happy marriage of function and form. “The contemporary look of the hospital is part of our image brand,” says Radecki who commissioned Big City Design for the interiors and fit-out. “We now have a reception area in both buildings where staff greet clients with a calm, professional manner.”

While its tranquil colour palette and comfy chairs create a serene ambience, the control of the sounds of the veterinary hospital required a more complex approach. As any vet knows, keeping dogs and cats quiet and calm is no easy task. SASH is proud of the fact that it’s the first certified cat-friendly hospital in Australia. The aim of this program is to ensure cats are in a stress-free environment separated from the sight, sounds and smells of dogs.

“Sound insulation creates a quieter environment when talking with clients,” says Radecki. The hospital has insulation in the ceiling to restrict sound movement and also soundproof glass in the treatment room which enables visibility of patients but reduces the carriage of sound. The reduction of sightlines between patients by cages



REVIEWERS WANTED!

We want you to write for

vet

PRACTICE



Every issue we're asking vets to review their tools—telling us in a couple of paragraphs what they love about them and what they don't like. Check out the reviews starting on page 43.

There's only two rules—you have to be a practicing vet or veterinary nurse, and it has to be something you use. The whole idea is to start a conversation between our readers. We don't want to tell you what to buy. We want your peers—the people actually using the equipment—to guide you to what's good and what isn't.

If you'd like to write a review, email Rob Johnson at rob@engagemedia.com.au, and he'll tell you what's involved.



Majella and Dr Sam Snelling of Melbourne's Advanced Vetcare are set up for specialised procedures that people want for their pets now.

facing away from each other has also assisted in minimising dogs barking at each other.

Control of ventilation and odours are also important in the fit-out for both of these referral hospitals. "Airflow and the way it travels from your practice is very important," says Snelling. "It's imperative to have clean air at pressure coming into your surgery and dirty air being suctioned out of the wards."

During Advanced Vetcare's fit-out, Snelling hired the Adelaide-based Hamilton Veterinary Design, which has designed more than 250 practices Australia-wide. "[Dr John Hamilton] showed us how to have our workspace planned in line with the multiple services we would be running," says Snelling. "He had good ideas about correct bench heights and ergonomic use of space. He ensured we have plenty of room to anaesthetise patients. We also avoided situations where multiple departments are straining for the same equipment by building separate areas for all the different services."

While SASH and Advanced Vetcare work as a comprehensive referral service, many clients were unaware these services existed. However, SASH has had the opportunity over the past five years to increase its profile and that of referral practices in Australia through the *Bondi Vet* series on Channel Ten. "We were in the right place at the right time," says Radecki.

"When they approached us, they knew we were young, fresh and keen to achieve so it was a good fit. Now we have people who visit SASH and take a picture of themselves out the front. However, it's not just *Bondi Vet* that brings our referrals and clients to SASH—it's our good name, excellent service and communication." ➤