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### Pet Talk: To meet a growing demand, more veterinarians trying to learn Spanish

By Jacques Von Lunen, Special to The Oregonian  
May 25, 2010, 4:49AM

Being a veterinarian has its challenges: After all, the patients can't say what ails them. But what if the animal's owner can't tell the vet, either, or at least can't describe the symptoms in English?

This scenario plays out in Oregon veterinary clinics as the percentage of foreign-born residents increases in the state.

With 11 percent of Oregonians identifying themselves as Hispanic, up from 8 percent a decade ago, veterinarians increasingly need to be conversant in Spanish. One chain of clinics headquartered in Portland contributed to a possible solution and was promptly criticized.

One option for Spanish-speaking parents is to bring their children with them.

"Speaking to clients through children is pretty common," says Nancy Titus, a veterinarian at the **Woodburn Veterinary Clinic**. About 20 percent of the clinic's clientele is Latino, she says, and a little less than a quarter speak little to no English.

The inherent difficulties are obvious: a young child may not understand the financial, medical and ethical nuances of the interaction, or may not know the terminology for a complicated process, no matter the language.

One technician at the Woodburn clinic speaks Spanish. On that person's days off, Titus says, "we're at the mercy of the children." She's resorted to sign language and to laying English and Spanish brochures side by side to conduct consultations.

"I wish we were all trained in Spanish," she says.

Knowledge of Spanish is an important factor in the hiring of vets and techs for Larry Peetz, owner of the **Companion Pet Clinic** in Northeast Portland. His clinic sees a lot of Latino clients, but he has every shift covered: two of his employees speak Spanish fluently and the office manager makes sure one of them is there at all times.

Both Peetz and Titus are quick to point out that, language aside, the concern for the animals is universal.

"These clients treat their animals as family members," Titus says. "Some borrow money to come in for treatment."

With the number of immigrants projected to increase, the number of Spanish-speaking veterinarians and technicians is not meeting the demand.

Nationwide, 3.3 percent of veterinary students in the class of 2008 identified themselves as Hispanic, according to the **Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges**. For the class scheduled to finish in 2011, that number rises to 3.9 percent.

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At **Oregon State University's College of Veterinary Medicine**, about two or three students per class are of Hispanic background, says Susan Tornquist, associate dean of the college. She knows that command of Spanish "would be a good thing for our students to have," she says, and adds that leadership of the school has "talked about an elective (course) for veterinarians in Spanish."

But budget constraints have prevented the school from offering a new course. Also, it's hard for students to "cram in more to the curriculum," Tornquist says.

Another option is bringing in professionals from Spanish-speaking countries.

The **American Veterinary Medical Association** offers a program that certifies foreign veterinarians for work in the United States. More than 200 from Latin America have gone through the program in the past 10 years.

That's not many, considering 55,000 veterinarians are employed in the U.S., according to the Bureau for Labor Statistics.

One problem is accreditation.

The association's Council on Education has accredited schools in the Netherlands, France, Scotland and Australia, among others. And for the past 15 years, a veterinary school in Mexico has tried to get accreditation, too. The vet college at the **Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico** (UNAM) has been turned down, primarily because its teaching hospital lagged behind its U.S. counterparts.

So in 2004, **Banfield, The Pet Hospital**, built a new teaching hospital for UNAM. The chief executive of the large chain of clinics, headquartered in Portland, said in the American Veterinary Medical Association journal that the low ratio of Hispanic veterinary students to Spanish-speaking clients in the U.S. played a role in that decision.

But the chain's vice president, Karen Johnson, downplayed that as a factor, saying instead, "We support the veterinary profession wherever we can."

After Banfield built the hospital, U.S. veterinarians complained in online forums that the company was trying to bring in cheaper labor. The Mexican vet school charges minimal fees, which means its students don't graduate saddled with debt and could afford to work for less.

Some faulted the Council on Education for even considering UNAM's case, given its perceived impact on the job market for U.S. vets. But the council said it only can take into account academic standards, not political or economic consequences.

And even with accreditation, graduates would need to pass board certification for the state in which they plan to practice, and the panel's decision would have no impact on work-visa requirements.

-- **Jacques Von Lunen**

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May 25, 2010, 10:28AM

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