



Sit, stay, heal: Staff at Friendship Hospital for Animals work in one of two intensive-care areas. A pug, lower right, uses a water-filled treadmill for hydrotherapy.

she brought patients to human hospitals to use their MRI machines: “Owners have wanted better medical, surgical, and diagnostic capabilities for their pets for a long time. Vets are just getting onboard.”

Nichols used to recommend total hip replacement only to police dogs, service dogs, or military dogs, but today, she says, “any dog that has crippling hip dysplasia is at least offered one.”

At Friendship, other features include an updated dental suite, an infectious-disease ward, a chemotherapy area, laser therapy, and a 24-hour emergency call center where people can chat online with hospital staff. (Dermatology and cardiology suites remain empty while Friendship recruits specialists.)

The hospital’s chief operating officer, Kieran Mara, says providing these services under one roof benefits patients because the vets involved in a case can easily discuss a diagnosis and comprehensive treatment.

There may, however, be such a thing as too much technology. VCA SouthPaws Veterinary Specialists & Emergency Center, now in Fairfax, opened 20 years ago in Springfield, becoming one of Washington’s pioneers for specialty services such as blood transfusions and brain surgery. But medical director and chief of surgery Bud Siemering cautions against overreliance on the latest, greatest machinery and procedures: “The most expensive option might not have a better prognosis than the least expensive or middle-of-the-road. Just because we can radiate cancer doesn’t mean we should radiate every cancer.”

Siemering says that with all the new technology available, it’s easy to fall into the same traps of human health care: leaning too heavily on testing and the latest “toys” at the expense of simply spending time with and observing patients—particularly important for those that can’t speak for themselves.

“Since our patients can never talk, we have to do the physical exam and talk to owners,” Siemering says. “I don’t want us to lose that just because we have the fancy blood test or a million-and-a-half-dollar machine.”

Melanie D.G. Kaplan (melaniedgkaplan.com) wrote last month’s column about a guide dog named Linus.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOY ASSICO

HIGH TECH AT THE VET

As owners seek more advanced options, a Washington animal hospital completes a \$5-million expansion

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

On a June morning at Friendship Hospital for Animals, veterinarians administer shots, inspect teeth, and listen to heartbeats. They also hoist a Newfoundland onto an MRI machine, where a radiologist scans the dog’s neck. Later, they’ll prepare the rehab room so a dachshund with a bum back can step on and off a piece of inflatable equipment meant to strengthen his core. Yes, his core.

With the completion of a \$5-million expansion this spring, the 80-year-old Tenleytown hospital—which already provided primary and 24-hour emergency care—doubled in size and became the only veterinary facility in the District with MRI and CT-scanning machines, an underwater treadmill for post-surgery hydrotherapy, a new intensive-care unit, and board-certified specialists in areas such as neurology and pathology.

The renovation was spurred in part by

practical reasons—hospital director Peter Glassman says the building was “bursting at the seams”—but mostly cultural ones. Just as pet ownership has evolved from keeping animals chained outdoors to letting them sleep in human beds, Glassman says people “want the same health care for their pets as they have for themselves.” His hospital is now much better equipped to capitalize on that lucrative desire—and to compete with other high-tech facilities in the area.

The American Pet Products Association projects that owners nationwide will spend \$16 billion on veterinary care this year. The number of annual vet visits has stagnated, but costs per visit are rising as owners seek advanced procedures. An MRI at Friendship, for example, runs \$1,650.

Utah vet Pam Nichols, a board member of the American Animal Hospital Association, says that when she began her career in 1996,