



Watsonville vet the only small animal dentist in region

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SOQUEL — From fractured jaws to doggie braces, Watsonville veterinarian Dr. Judy Force has seen it all.

Force, who has lived at the base of Mt. Madonna for the past eight years, has found a niche as the only small animal dentist on the Central Coast.

She has "lots" of stories — everything from a root canal on a police dog with a broken tooth to jaw surgery on a show dog whose tooth never grew in because of a facial bite wound.

About three-quarters of her work involves cleaning, crowns, root canals, and periodontics. The rest is spent on jaw fracture repairs and tumor removals on her patients, which include dogs, cats and the occasional rabbit or ferret, Force said.

Force also helps out with an occasional horse at her home, which she said is not nearly as intimidating as it sounds.

Santa Cruz-based equine general practitioner Dr. Ann Terry, who has had her own business for three years, also does occasional dentistry out of the home of her friend Force, where she can make use of metal "stocks" to keep sedated animals steady.

Force switched completely to dentistry this summer after increasing her dental procedures for the past eight years. She has practiced veterinary medicine for 19 years after earning her degree from the University of California, Davis.

Throughout the United States and Europe, there are only 86 veterinary dentists certified by the American Board of Veterinary Specialties of the American Veterinary Medical Association, according to the American Veterinary Dental College

Force will have to spend about three more years to gain certification because she will continue working instead of attending a residency program. To gain certification, Force must send case logs to the AVDC and meet regularly with her mentor in San Diego.

The shift to dentistry allows Force to keep challenging herself, she said.

"There's always more to learn and it's an area that I've always been interested in," she explained. "I love my work."

The busy veterinarian works twice a week at the Santa Cruz Veterinary Hospital, a few times a month in Salinas and recently took over an East Bay practice several times a week.

"For me to do dentistry, I do have to move around a lot more," she acknowledged.

On a recent visit to the Veterinary Hospital, Force introduced terriers Finn and Disney, and described her work on Doodles, a small dog recovering from a fractured jaw.

To explain the jaw fracture procedure, Force showed a series of high-tech digital x-rays and photos on her nearby laptop computer. She extended wire through the bone in two places, then put acrylic over the jaw and sent the dog on its way.

In addition to regular cleanings, Force does a thorough work-up on her small patients, including a complete mouth chart, blood pressure and heart rate monitor.

Force, not surprisingly, is serious about teeth.

"Many veterinarians don't realize the importance of teeth. Most just clean and extract," she said. "I'm into saving teeth whenever possible."

Force added that many pets are good at "hiding" their dental discomfort from their owners, making an annual dental checkup essential.

Force's receptionist, Julie Stewart, said that Force's calm demeanor helps soothe pet owners.

"She really has the patient's best interests at heart," she said.

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