Are Exotics a Fit for Me?

PART 1: DEVELOPMENT OF THE EXOTICS PRACTICE

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To see (exotics) or not to see…that is a very good question.

The quality of exotic pet medicine has increased dramatically over the last decade, which is illustrated by the appearance of board-certified specialists for exotic animals and increasing numbers of high quality articles in the peer-reviewed veterinary literature. However, the decision whether to incorporate exotic pets into a practice should be made carefully.

ADDING EXOTICS: READY OR NOT?
The term exotic pets traditionally refers to any pet that is not a dog, cat, or large farm animal, and includes pet goats and chickens, parrots, reptiles, rabbits, and rodents. Some practices elect to add exotic companion mammals first, as mammal medicine is generally more familiar than avian and reptile medicine.

However, no one should add exotics reluctantly or “to make a few extra bucks” because no other veterinarians in the area are providing that service. Exotics should be added only when the practice staff is enthused about—or at least open to—the prospect. The team must be committed to adding an entirely new skill set and participating in regular continuing education to continue the learning process.

Practices must make a full commitment to clinical competency to avoid “doing harm,” and they must be willing and prepared to seek help from colleagues or decline to see exotic pets altogether. Client expectations have increased as well, and many demand a level of care equal to what they receive for their dogs and cats.

The initial path to clinical competency includes:
1. Acquisition of a basic knowledge base, including husbandry information, and technical skills through initial staff training, followed by regular continuing education
2. Acquisition of additional resources and equipment necessary for exotics practice (Figure 1, page 74)

TABLE 1.
Selected Resources for Veterinarians Interested in Increasing Proficiency in Exotic Pet Medicine

| Professional Organizations | • Association of Avian Veterinarians (aav.org) |
| • Association of Exotic Mammal Veterinarians (aemv.org) |
| • Association of Reptilian and Amphibian Veterinarians (arav.org) |

| Continuing Education with Exotic Pet Emphasis | • ExoticsCon (exoticscon.org), which often combines the AAV, AEMV, and ARAV conferences |
| • NAVC Conference (navc.com) |
| • Wisconsin Exotic Animal Veterinary Conference (apps.vetmed.wisc.edu) |
| • Wildlife and Exotic Animal Medicine Symposium, University of California–Davis (vetmed.ucdavis.edu/CE, under Wildlife tab) |
| • Oxbow Animal Health Exotic Mammal Symposia (oxbowanimalhealth.com/vets/exotic_symposium) |

Many other conferences, including state meetings, are now incorporating exotic pet topics into their programs.

| Periodicals | • Journal of Avian Medicine and Surgery (aav.org/?page=jamshome) |
| • Journal of Exotic Pet Medicine (exoticpetmedicine.com) |
| • Journal of Herpetological Medicine and Surgery (jherpmedsurg.com/loi/hpms) |
| • Veterinary Clinics of North America: Exotic Animal Practice (vetexotic.theclinics.com) |
PRACTICE BUILDING

TRAINING EXISTING STAFF

Nothing destroys the confidence of exotic pet owners more than reception and technical staff with little working knowledge of these pets. In some cases, staff members are unable to identify exotic pets or even provide basic information to owners over the phone. In other cases, staff members are obviously uncomfortable with handling and restraining these animals. For these reasons, the entire team should participate in the development of an exotics practice.

Many conferences (Table 1, page 73) offer training opportunities for staff members. However, finding the right combination suitable for every skill level is challenging, especially when funds must go to cover continuing education for traditional pet species as well.

- Multi-day exotics only conferences offering hands-on laboratories are excellent options.
- Exotic animal topics are increasing in number and popularity within conferences previously dedicated to traditional pet species, including the NAVC Conference and others; this approach allows busy practitioners and team members to spend time in both traditional pet species and exotics sessions.

Some well-established private exotics practices may consider hosting veterinary visitors (veterinarians or technicians) for short-term visits as well. This is an exceptional opportunity to observe an existing exotics practice in action. Alternatively, one might consider contacting an exotics expert to inquire about custom in-house training, because travel costs and a stipend for a private in-house conference may be similar to sending multiple staff members to outside conferences.

ACQUISITION OF RESOURCES & EQUIPMENT

Journals

Several veterinary clinical medicine journals focus specifically on exotics, including:

| TABLE 2. Textbooks Recommended for Developing Exotic Animal Practices |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
|                           | BSAVA Exotic Pet Series, various editions and authors, BSAVA. |

This list is by no means comprehensive; there are many other excellent textbooks available.

Further Training for the Practitioner: ABVP Exotics Specialties

If you find that you have a passion and competency for exotics, further training is readily available at conference wet labs, and you can pursue specialist designation—in Avian Practice, Exotic Companion Mammal Practice, and/or Reptile and Amphibian Practice—through the American Board of Veterinary Practitioners (ABVP, abvp.com). The ABVP is an American Veterinary Medical Association recognized specialty organization and their credentialing routes are designed specifically for the private practitioner who excels in clinical practice in a species group or associated area.
• Journal of Avian Medicine and Surgery (JAMS)
• Journal of Exotic Pet Medicine (JEPM)
• Journal of Herpetological Medicine and Surgery (JHMS).

Each of these journals is included with membership in its sponsoring organization—Association of Avian Veterinarians, Association of Exotic Mammal Veterinarians, and Association of Reptilian and Amphibian Veterinarians, respectively (Table 1) (see Development of Mentors & Experts, page 76).

Veterinary Clinics of North America Exotic Animal Practice provides comprehensive reviews of specific topics, such as dentistry, surgery, and behavior. A number of small animal veterinary journals include articles on exotic animal medicine as well.

Textbooks
Exotic pet medicine textbooks are numerous, and more are published every year, which contrasts with the scant resources available a decade ago. Some of these textbooks focus on specific species, and some on specific topics, such as exotic mammal radiology and behavior. Table 2 contains a list of textbooks that the veterinary team at my clinic find particularly helpful.

Online Resources
Online resources, such as the Veterinary Information Network (VIN, vin.com), have an active and extensive section dedicated to exotic

TABLE 3.
Basic Equipment Required for Exotic Animal Practice That May Not Be Readily Available in a Traditional Canine/Feline Pet Practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Handling</th>
<th>Escape-proof containers in case pets are not brought in an appropriate enclosure</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Small- to medium-sized squeeze cages</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Various sized towels for restraint</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Examination</td>
<td>Gram scale (weighing in 1 g increments) (Figure 2)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Secure containers or perches to set on the gram scale for patients to rest in/on comfortably</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mouth speculums designed for birds</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Discarded credit card for gently opening the mouth of reptiles</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Pediatric stethoscope</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Small diameter thermometers or temperature probes</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Various sized nail trimmers, and hand-held rotary tool (eg, Dremel) for bird nail trims</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Magnification, ideally with a light source (also for surgery)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Diagnostic</td>
<td>Smaller needles/syringes for blood sample collection</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Micro blood sample tubes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surgical/ Critical Care</td>
<td>Incubators with temperature control and oxygen inlets (Figure 3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Safe high-tech warming blankets with temperature control settings</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Smaller gauge IV catheters</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pediatric infusion or syringe pump (Figure 4)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Smaller anesthetic masks</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Smaller endotracheal tubes (ie, 1–4 mm, uncuffed)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Smaller or micro surgical instruments</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Small to medium hemostasis clips</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Atraumatic towel clamps</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Transparent surgical drapes</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Smaller sized suture</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ultrasonic Doppler (minimum monitoring equipment); other equipment may be suitable for smaller exotics as well</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note that some equipment is more applicable for specific species.

FIGURE 2. Simple plastic container placed on a digital scale to weigh small exotic pets.

FIGURE 3. A small animal incubator with digital temperature control, modified to allow oxygen supplementation. This incubator can house small exotic mammals, reptiles, and birds.

FIGURE 4. A pediatric syringe pump can be used to deliver small volumes of intravenous or intraosseous fluids.
animal medicine. One benefit of VIN membership is access to a variety of conference proceedings that can be reviewed for basic, intermediate, and advanced information.

ExoticDVM (groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/exoticdvm/info) is a free online forum that hosts more than 1000 veterinary professionals who regularly share cases and advice. Several exotics-oriented companies—including Lafeber Company (lafeber.com/vet) and Oxbow Animal Health (oxbowanimalhealth.com/vets)—host veterinary portals containing a wealth of information.

**Equipment**

Most equipment required for exotics practice is already stocked in the veterinary clinic, especially equipment and supplies appropriate for exotic companion mammals. More specialty equipment may be required for avian and reptile practice. Some veterinary manufacturers offer equipment specifically for exotic pet practice:

- **Table 3**, page 75, features specialized equipment that is extremely useful for exotics medicine.
- **Table 4** features products routinely used in my practice and their sources.

**Development of Mentors & Experts**

**Associations**

The following associations promote exotic animal medicine and provide resources for exotic animal practitioners (**Table 1**, page 73):

- Association of Avian Veterinarians (aav.org)
- Association of Exotic Mammal Veterinarians (aemv.org)
• Association of Reptilian and Amphibian Veterinarians (arav.org).
  These associations include lists of members by location, and some provide veterinary forums and other benefits for members. Each offer a yearly continuing education conference, often held together, and sometimes with other exotics-related groups.

**Professional Networking**
All practices seeing exotic pets should develop a network of specialists and experts for consultation and referral. If there is no expert in the area, a practice should consider phone/Internet consultation, as most board-certified exotics specialists will consult with colleagues, sometimes for a consultation fee, depending on the complexity of the case.

The ABVP website (abvp.com) provides lists of board-certified specialists by specialty group, including avian, exotic companion mammal, and/or reptile and amphibian practice (see **Further Training for the Practitioner: ABVP Exotics Specialties**, page 74). Note that some practitioners are specialists in more than one exotics category. Other experts (not necessarily boarded) can be found by location on the association websites provided under **Associations**.

It is often useful to approach expert lecturers at conferences to see if they are willing to provide support, and most colleagues dedicated to teaching are also open to occasional phone consults. The best approach is to introduce yourself, explain your interest in developing your skills, and ask the best way to keep in contact.

**THE NEXT STEPS**
In order to begin the process of adding exotics to a practice, the staff must be on board, training must commence, equipment needs to be purchased, and a mentor should be secured. Once your practice has completed the above steps, the earnest work of developing the exotics practice begins. The next article in this series will cover further development of the exotics practice, including scheduling, price setting, and marketing of exotics services.

ABVP = American Board of Veterinary Practitioners; VIN = Veterinary Information Network