



HERE'S A SECRET ...

We Are Real-Life Superheroes

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Well, it happened again. At another social function I was introduced to a “Jane Jungle,” animal lover extraordinaire. You can probably piece together the ensuing conversation. From the twinkle in her eye as she exclaimed that she too “wanted to be a vet when she was younger” to the “but I couldn’t handle euthanizing animals/animals in pain/science/the school needed” to the awkward smile plastered on my face, nervous twittering laugh, even my teeth gritting the way my dentist warned me to avoid. Most of these conversations end well. We hear from these naïve souls about how lucky we are and then we move on to complimenting the host’s homemade coleslaw.

Later that night I wondered why that inevitable conversation always makes me so nervous. Sure, some lead to discussions of a beloved pet’s death or criticism of veterinary medicine, but it’s that twinkle that really raises my heart rate. That moment when the person at the party or even in the exam room starts to look for your superhero costume. The golden caduceus glowing, the bottle of cure-all “shot” at your holster, and the aura of healing power from your hands. That pedestal is a scary place to be! Biology and medicine work in probabilities, not guarantees. And while we understand that our

ability to palpate abdominal tumors and perform other acts of medicine is due to science, practice, and education, some of our clients assume that since we were able to do something “miraculous” once, now all veterinarians should be able to do all the things, all the time. It’s a long fall off that person’s proverbial pedestal. Add in a touch of envy and it is no surprise veterinarians are the subject of such internet vitriol.

The truth is more complicated, as it almost always is. Superman cried. Iron Man made mistakes. Even Thor gave in to the habit of emotional eating! Screenwriters made those superheroes more human so we would feel connected to them. Most of our clients feel deeply connected to their veterinarians. They want to hear about your kids, learn about your family, see pictures of your pets. They will hug, smile, and laugh with us. A shockingly high percentage will understand when something goes wrong, a mistake was made, or even if we (gasp!) take a vacation. It turns out that they still believe in us even when we doubt ourselves.

And, more importantly, they should. I’ve seen veterinarians heal burns with makeshift fish skin transplants, rapid-transfuse blood while doing CPR on crashing rodenticide toxin ingestions, and pull fence posts out of horses’ chests. And yes, those patients all lived. Veterinarians beat the odds. We do it every single day. Better yet, we rewrite the odds. New medicines, new procedures, and creative thinking at every level of veterinary medicine from general practice to academic specialties mean we change the game in favor of our patients, our clients, and ourselves. **TVP**

Ben Kirchner

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This column is titled “The Secret Life of Vets” so I can talk about the secrets that really should be considered well-known truths. These are the not-so-secret secrets that can help change our thinking and our profession for the better.

