Choosing a Rabbit Veterinarian

Good rabbit veterinarians are hard to find. Rabbit medicine requires special training, understanding, and dedication to keeping up with the latest information. Your rabbit is an important member of your family. You'll need to put some time and energy into finding the right person to trust with your rabbit's life. Remember, too, that quality veterinary care is not cheap. You will be working with a specialist and should be prepared to pay for her expertise.

Don't assume that the clinic down the street or the veterinarian who is so wonderful with a friend's dog or cat is a good place to start. The most dangerous veterinarians are those who don't know about rabbits and won't admit it! If there is a local rescue group in your area, or if you know other people with rabbits, ask for referrals. Don't, however, assume that because a doctor is recommended that she is necessarily right for you.

If you can't get a recommendation, start with the Yellow Pages and call the clinics that mention "Exotics" in their advertisements. Ask if they treat rabbits, and if so, approximately how many a year they see. More is usually better, but not always. Ask if you can schedule a time to talk to the primary rabbit doctor and ask some general questions. You may choose to do this by phone or you may ask to meet the doctor in person and tour the clinic.

Either through recommendations or from the Yellow Pages, try to come up with at least three doctors to interview. (This may mean looking some distance from your home.) Have a standard set of questions that you ask each one. The following are some of the questions you might want to ask and some tips on evaluating the answers you get. Of course, you will want to add your own questions!

1. **What percent of the rabbits you see are indoor companions? Outdoor pets? Show/stock animals?** More rabbits are not necessarily better if a large percent are considered livestock or live alone in a hutch outside. If the best veterinarian you can find sees primarily these types of rabbits (and this is possible in some areas), you will have to do a lot of educating about your rabbit's role in your family and the lengths to which you are willing to go to keep him healthy. Doctors who treat rabbits as "livestock" are more likely to suggest euthanasia for an ill — or even "imperfect" — rabbit.

2. **What diagnostic tools and treatments do you normally use for GI slowdowns? What is your success rate?** Avoid any doctor who mentions surgery except as a last resort. They will also probably have a low success rate. Look for doctors who use x-rays to determine whether there is an actual obstruction and treat accordingly. Motility drugs such as Reglan® (metoclopramide) and Propulsid® (cisapride) are excellent if there is no obstruction, but can be deadly if there is. A GI slowdown with no obstruction may be a result of stress or it may be secondary to other physical ailments such as bacterial infections or dental problems. A good veterinarian will treat the GI problem **and** try to find the source of the problem. Regardless of the cause of the slowdown, a good veterinarian will suggest supportive measures such as subcutaneous fluids, abdominal massage, and keeping the rabbit warm. If your rabbit is not eating or drinking on his own, she will probably suggest syringe-feeding to get the GI moving again. Ask what she recommends. Good answers include Oxbow's Critical Care, canned pumpkin (100% pumpkin only, not pie filling), a softened pellet mixture, Ensure or Deliver 2.0, baby foods (avoid those containing onion), or some combination of these. She may also suggest oral fluids including fresh pineapple juice, Pedialyte, or Gatorade. Finally, ask her opinion about pain medication for GI problems. Banamine® (flunixin meglumine) is excellent for this type of pain and can literally make the difference between life and death.

3. **When treating infections, what diagnostic tools do you use to determine which medication to prescribe?** Beware of a veterinarian who simply prescribes Baytril® (enrofloxacin) — or any other drug — without attempting to identify the bacteria. If you get this answer, ask about doing a culture/sensitivity test. Many veterinarians don't suggest this because clients are unwilling to spend the money. This is one way to communicate how important it is to you that your rabbit be given the best possible care! A good veterinarian should be happy to have you bring up the subject.

When an infection is present, most veterinarians will initiate antibiotic therapy while waiting for results of the culture/sensitivity test. The best diagnosticians do cytology (gram staining and then viewing a sample through a microscope) to visually identify yeast, bacteria, or both. If bacteria are present, it is best to follow up with a culture/sensitivity to determine the drug(s) that will be most effective. A doctor who does cytology well has a better chance of prescribing the right drug initially.

4. **Under what conditions (if any) would you prescribe Amoxicillin, Clindamicin, or Erythromycin for a rabbit?** The answer should be "Never!" or possibly "Only if every other option has been tried and has failed." **Oral** penicillin (Amoxicillin, Ampicillin, etc.) or erythromycin can kill your rabbit by destroying the good gut flora. Death can occur shortly after administration of the drug or up to three weeks after the drug has been taken. **Injectable** Penicillin G is a fairly safe antibiotic for rabbits, though normally not a first-choice drug. (See sections on Infections and Drugs for more detail.)

5. **What types of surgery, if any, have you performed on rabbits? What is your success rate? If a rabbit needs to be sedated or anesthetized for a procedure, what anesthetic do you use?** If the doctor you are talking to does not do surgery, ask where she would refer you if surgery were necessary. A veterinarian who does not do surgery may not be a bad choice — an excellent surgeon may be more likely to suggest a surgical solution for conditions that can be treated in less invasive ways. However, if you choose a doctor who does not do surgery, be sure to interview the surgeon as well! Success rates should be high (at or near 100% for routine procedures such as neuters and spays). The safest anesthetic for rabbits is isoflurane gas. It is best if the rabbit is masked rather than intubated unless your veterinarian is skilled at intubation. (For people good at intubating, this is a safer route since there is no chance for aspiration and the airway is preserved through virtually all maneuvering).

6. **What is your opinion of de-clawing a rabbit?** Rabbits do not have retractable claws like cats do. A rabbit's claws are an integral part of the foot's structure. A rabbit who has been de-clawed has actually had the first phalanx of each toe amputated. Be wary of any veterinarian who doesn't know this.

7. **How would you handle a critical illness (for example, cancer) where the care of a specialist was required, but the specialist has no experience treating rabbits?** Look for a doctor who is comfortable working as part of a treatment team. If you are lucky (as I was), the veterinarian you are talking to will answer with this approach. If not, ask if she would be willing to be the rabbit specialist in a team environment. Some day your rabbit's life may depend on her answer.

If you are interested in including alternative medicine — herbs, acupuncture, chiropractic manipulation, etc. — as part of your rabbit's health care options, it is wise to find out how your veterinarian feels about these techniques in the early stages of your relationship. Some traditional veterinarians are very open to combining holistic and traditional western medicine; some are skeptical, but still willing to trying non-traditional approaches; and some view holistic medicine as complete nonsense. If you are planning to try holistic treatments, especially herbs, it is **extremely** important for you to be comfortable discussing these treatments with your rabbit's primary veterinarian. As herbs are being used more in both human and veterinary medicine, more **interactions** are being discovered between herbs and traditional drugs. It is

important for you to feel comfortable telling your veterinarian about **all** treatments your rabbit is receiving and to know that she will consider interactions between herbs and the medications she prescribes.

You will also want to find out about the doctor's after-hours emergency coverage. If doctors in the clinic rotate being "on call" — or if your vet uses an emergency clinic — ask how much these doctors know about rabbit health. Unless they are equally skilled in dealing with rabbits, ask if your doctor is willing to be contacted (by the emergency doctor) for phone consultations in case of an emergency with your rabbit.

If you don't find a veterinarian you are completely comfortable with during your initial search, identify the "best" candidate(s) — **and keep looking**. Continue asking rabbit friends for referrals and check the Yellow Pages each year for new "Exotics" veterinarians. Be patient and persistent — your rabbit is worth it!

Once you find a veterinarian you are happy with, don't put all your eggs in one basket. Continue your search until you also have at least one good backup. Remember, your primary veterinarian is only human. She will need time off for seminars, vacations, and family emergencies. She may become ill, decide to become a full-time parent, move to another city, or simply "burn out." You need a backup plan.

Every bit as important as a doctor's professional knowledge and skills is her openness to outside information. It is essential that she recognize that you are the expert on what is normal behavior for your rabbit and that she respects your instinct that something is wrong. Equally critical is openness to new information from a variety of sources (including the Internet) and a willingness to consult with other veterinarians if a case is unusual or if your rabbit is not responding to standard treatments. Although it is important for you to have confidence in your veterinarian and for her to have self-confidence, blind trust is dangerous. If at any time you are not comfortable with the treatment she is providing, don't hesitate to get a second opinion. Remember, each doctor has her strengths and weaknesses. When you have a sick bunny, choose a doctor based on the person most qualified to treat the **current** problem. Remember, your bunny's life depends on the medical choices you make for him.

Hemi was lucky to be rescued from the shelter by Kristy. During his neuter the vet discovered his teeth were a mess and many of them had to be extracted. Hemi is thriving on a diet of baby food, softened pellets (imported from Canada) and canned pumpkin. (Photo by Kathy Smith)