

Vet hospital finds specialty in toughest cases

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by [Patrick Hogan](#)

CARY - Nobody deserves cancer, and Grits was no exception.

The 8-year-old kerry blue terrier was a good dog, mild-mannered and patient. Her owner, Floranne Etheridge, had raised her to compete in obedience shows, and once a week she worked as a therapy dog at the VA hospital near her home in Columbia, S.C. She was part of the family.

So it's hardly surprising that Etheridge and her family were caught off guard when Grits was diagnosed with canine lymphosarcoma shortly after they moved to Raleigh in 1997. The options seemed scant: Either try to maneuver their way into receiving care at the School of Veterinary Medicine at North Carolina State University, which is selective in the cases it takes, or make Grits as comfortable as possible and await the inevitable.

But Grits' veterinarian had another idea. She suggested the Veterinary Specialty Hospital of the Carolinas, a private, Cary-based veterinary practice focused on specialty care such as oncology, neurology and emergency services. Etheridge contacted the hospital on a Friday, and by Monday, Grits was undergoing chemotherapy.

That decision, Etheridge says, extended her dog's life for more than five years.

Not every pet that walks into VSH is able to walk out with a clean bill of health. For some animals, the best the veterinarians at VSH can do is buy time, says Dr. Kevin Concannon, co-founder of VSH and hospital administrator.

"If success meant every animal walking out of here feeling healthy and normal, we'd fail all the time," Concannon says. "In medicine and science, it's great to go for a cure, but there's so much more you can do."

At VSH, the focus is exactly that - providing the types of veterinary care that general practitioners either don't or can't offer. Founded in 1997 by Concannon and a pair of partners - Drs. Gary Spodnick and Jerry Waddle - VSH was among the first specialty hospitals in North Carolina and, perhaps, the nation, to open specifically to treat the worst of the worst in veterinary medical cases.

While the three doctors brought a tremendous amount of medical knowledge when they opened the practice, Concannon admits a decade later that the trio's business know-how may have been slightly lacking.

"From a business perspective, we didn't know very much," Concannon says. "These days, they teach you a little of that in vet school. Back then, they didn't touch the business side."

Concannon quit a research job at Duke University about six months early so that he could focus on the business aspects of establishing a medical practice. The three doctors landed a conventional business loan for about \$250,000 and set up shop in a 4,000-square-foot facility in Cary. Initially focusing on emergency care, surgery and oncology, the three doctors refused to take paychecks for nearly a year and spent nothing on advertising and marketing.

"After about a year, we started paying ourselves," Concannon recalls, "and after two years, we started to see some profit."

He and his colleagues funneled the profits back into the company, purchasing equipment and adding staff. By 2000, space was at a premium, so the founders bought an undeveloped lot off Tryon Road in Cary and, in 2003, opened a new, 24,000-square-foot facility.

Today, state-of-the-art medical equipment is scattered throughout the facility, much of it identical to equipment found at any human hospital. In the first-floor intensive care unit: a Pyxis medication dispensing and inventory system. On the lower level: the first linear accelerator in North Carolina to be used solely for veterinary care, along with a full-size CT scanner. Concannon says he once visited a human hospital due to a slight heart arrhythmia. The ultrasound machine used to view his heart was identical to the one he has at work.

The Cary hospital employs about 100 workers, including 11 full-time and two part-time veterinarians. A second branch opened in north Raleigh in September with about 30 employees, including five full-time doctors.

All in all, Concannon says the practice has proven to be a success. Revenue last year topped \$8 million, and the practice's network of patients and referring veterinarians has steadily expanded. The vast majority of clients come from around the Triangle and the eastern part of the state, but people have brought their pets from as far away as Delaware.

Despite the business success, Concannon emphasizes that the heart and soul of VSH is its medical acumen and the philosophy of its employees.

"People don't go into this for the business side," Concannon says. "People go into this for the medical side ... There is a lot of emotional value to the human-animal relationship, and that is the basis of the veterinary profession."
