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UF Small Animal Hospital Nutrition Service ramps up with addition of new resident



Dr. Richard Hill, left, and Dr. Justin Shmalberg visit with a dog that has been receiving care for malnutrition at UF, along with her puppies.
(Photo by Sarah Carey)

by SARAH CAREY

Animals with nutrition-related problems ranging from obesity to malnourishment will benefit from an enhanced program at the University of Florida's Small Animal Hospital.

The hospital's first-ever resident in small animal nutrition recently joined the cadre of residents studying more traditional specialty areas, such as medicine and surgery, beefing up a service that has grown in demand in recent years.

Justin Shmalberg, D.V.M., began his residency in July as the Waltham/Chi Institute Resident in Small Animal Clinical Nutrition, a designation made to acknowledge funding support the hospital received from Waltham and the Chi Institute.

"Most of our outside funding for residencies has come from the Army, the government of another country or a private veterinary hospital group," said Richard Hill,

Vet.M.B., Ph.D., an associate professor of small animal internal medicine and clinical nutrition. Hill is board-certified in both internal medicine and veterinary nutrition, and serves as chief of the hospital's internal medicine service.

"Pet food companies do sometimes fund residencies, but we are very lucky to now have one here," Hill said.

One of only about 60 board-certified veterinary nutritionists in the country and Florida's only small animal expert in the field, Hill has been providing nutritional advice on his own at the college for the past 15 years.

"There has been a need to train more residents and to have someone more freely available," Hill said.

Shmalberg is working closely with the oncology, neurology and shelter medicine services, to name a few. He deals with a range of nutrition-related problems, including disease management, obesity management, critical care nutrition and balancing home-cooked diets for dogs where owners choose to cook for their animals and in situations where commercial diets aren't quite adequate for the animal's needs.

"I actually had told Dr. Hill that I was interested in a nutrition residency during my time here last year as the acupuncture intern," said Shmalberg.

"At that time, it was clear there wasn't going to be enough caseload to support a resident without external funding.

However, he told me if we could find some funding, it would likely be possible."

Shmalberg said he always thought that his career would likely have some type of nutritional focus.

"As almost everyone is aware, there is an increased need for specialists to help clients and veterinarians examine these new trends and make individualized recommendations," he said. "After all, no matter what the treatment is, clients will always need to feed their pets, and what they, or their veterinarians, choose to feed may play prominently in both wellness and during times of illness."

A University of Wisconsin graduate, Shmalberg had a strong interest in integrative therapies and in small animal general practice, as well as in animal nutrition. After his UF internship, he worked at the Haile Plantation Animal Clinic, doing general practice and some acupuncture.

“During that time, Dr. Hill was able to secure interest from Waltham in support of a new residency program here at UF,” Shmalberg said. “Since the Chi Institute maintains a strong interest in the research of botanical compounds as treatment options, and he knew I hoped to pursue this area, Dr. (Huisheng) Xie offered to jointly support this project.”

Xie, who mentored Shmalberg in his acupuncture internship, is a UF CVM faculty member and owner of the Chi Institute in Ocala. The nutrition caseload at the UF Small Animal Hospital has already exceeded Shmalberg’s expectations.

“Many of the complex cases that come in can benefit from a nutrition consult, and from further recommendations furnished to the referring practitioner,” Shmalberg said.

For more information about UF’s small animal nutrition service, or to make an appointment, call 352-392-2235 or visit www.vethospitals.ufl.edu.

<http://www.vetmed.ufl.edu/college/pr/news/NutritionServiceBenefitsfromNewResident.html>