

AVMA Press Release

New Age of 'Pocket Pet' Medicine Begins—AVMA Grants Exotic Companion Mammal Specialty Provisional Recognition

(SCHAUMBURG, Ill.) April 22, 2008—The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) has granted provisional recognition to the first completely new veterinary specialty since 1993. The new specialty will focus on small mammals commonly known as “pocket pets,” including rabbits, ferrets, guinea pigs, mice and other small mammals.

The new Exotic Companion Mammal (ECM) specialty was approved by the AVMA Executive Board on April 12, 2008.

“The public and the profession will see these specialists as providing that next level of care of small exotic pets,” explains Dr. Beth Sabin, assistant director of the AVMA's Education and Research Division. “This new specialty is really the outgrowth of the growing and ever increasing knowledgebase of the particular needs of these animals in order to keep them healthy.”

Americans own 6.2 million pet rabbits, 1.2 million hamsters, 1.1 million ferrets, and a million guinea pigs, according to *the 2007 AVMA U.S. Pet Ownership & Demographics Sourcebook*. The new ECM practice area includes these and other more unusual small pets, including hedge hogs and sugar gliders, but doesn't include illegal pet species—sometimes referred to as “fad pets”—which have been linked to the spread of zoonotic diseases. In 2003, prairie dogs and Gambian giant pouched rats kept as pets were linked to a deadly monkey pox outbreak.

Dr. Michael Dutton, chair of the organizing committee of the ECM and co-founder of the Association of Exotic Mammal Veterinarians—which began petitioning for the specialty in 2004—said that new technologies have made treatment of these small animals possible.

“Today, a veterinarian can visualize really small items like inspecting a tooth in the mouth of a hamster. I have performed a c-section on a mouse,” says Dr. Dutton. “People are more

attached to these little pets, and there is more we can do today to treat them. There is a real scientific basis for veterinary care of these little guys.”

Dr. Dutton explained that the ECM specialty already has a foothold in education, as many avian residencies today include the study exotic mammals. Applicants for the new specialty will be required to have six years experience in the ECM field of specialty, letters of reference, relevant education, and they must have published articles in the field. Once they meet these requirements, they’ll have to pass a two-day examination.

The credentialing and testing of new candidates to the specialty will be overseen by the American Board of Veterinary Practitioners (ABVP)—which oversees many practice areas, including canine and feline, swine and the new ECM specialty.

Dr. Larry Dee, the American Board of Veterinary Specialties representative from the ABVP and an incoming AVMA Executive Board member, said that the ABVP determined that there was a need for the new ECM practice area because there was a sufficient and unique body of knowledge on these animals and an adequate number of specialists and potential diplomates to administer and govern the new college.

“The recognition of this specialty allows the public and the profession to identify those individuals who, recognized by the AVMA through an independent credentialing and examination process, have demonstrated superior knowledge and skills in exotic companion mammals,” Dr. Dee explains.

The average salary for board certified specialists is \$109,000, compared to \$79,000 for veterinarians with just a doctorate in veterinary medicine. “Although veterinary specialists often earn more than general veterinary practitioners, specialists generally gain most by having a special focus that they can offer their clients,” Dr. Sabin says. “And clients benefit, too. Many times a veterinarian, when faced with a unique pet, may have to tell a client, ‘I have never worked on this type of animal.’ Clients will now be able to seek out a board certified ECM specialist to treat their pet.”

The new provisional recognition granted the ECM specialty by the AVMA is temporary. The specialty group has between four and ten years to petition for full recognition from the AVMA.

The first ECM examination is expected to be held in November of 2009, and the first group of ECM diplomates are expected to receive certification in December of 2009.

The new ECM specialty is the first of seven new specialties that have been proposed in recent years. Since 2002, the AVMA has received letters of intent from five new specialty organizations, including the new ECM specialty and a reptile and amphibian specialty. The new reptile and amphibian specialty is currently proceeding through a public comment period required for provisional approval from the AVMA.

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