

DR. PATTY RICKARD

Caring for 4-legged friends in a different way.



“ I get to know the animal and family in their home environment. It’s a more intimate view. It’s more convenient and less stressful for everyone.”

BY VIRGINIA BRYAN PHOTOGRAPHY BY LOVELY CUTLER

There are no appointments necessary at the open air veterinary clinics of Patty Rickard, D.V.M. Just show up. Bells don't ring when you arrive and there are no padded chairs to sit on. Don't fuss about formalities. She prefers to be called Dr. Patty. There are no cat and dog magazines to peruse while you wait your turn. But don't worry, there is plenty of entertainment and opportunities to people and pet watch. Just like you and yours, they opt for the convenience, economy and sheer fun of Dr. Patty's unique approach to veterinary services.

At the Chihuahua Roundup

On the second Saturday of each month, the downtown and west end grounds of Shipton's Big R are transformed into Dr. Patty's work space. She and her support crew, always grinning and with ample dog and cat treats in their pockets, provide "on the spot" cat and dog vaccinations, and routine pet care such as parasite control and heartworm blood tests right on the spot.

There are no closed doors at the Saturday clinics and therein lies the charm. Everyone sees everything. "It's all out there," Dr. Patty says. Remembering her introduction to the outdoor clinics, she adds, "It was baptism by fire. Everything that could happen on that first day happened."

One of those early clinics has gone into the annals of Dr. Patty's history as the "Chihuahua roundup." An elderly couple arrived and "six or seven Chihuahuas just tumbled out of their car." Dr. Patty shakes her head as she remembers the helter-skelter affair. "Those little dogs were spinning and yipping and jumping. After containing them in a large walk-in kennel, we got them all, one at a time, wormed and vaccinated." As she and her crew laughed and worked, everyone else, including the owners, one on oxygen and one using a walker, watched in amazement.

Dr. Patty recalls making the decision to start the monthly Shipton's Big R clinics. "My friends encouraged me and said they'd help." It's a testament to Dr. Patty's good nature, her flexibility and her veterinary skills that she has the same team she started with. Two crew members meet and greet pet owners, handle the paperwork and ready vaccines for each animal. Two others work with Dr. Patty as handlers. They can subdue everything from yipping Chihuahuas to big, yellow labs which get nervous around needles. Dr. Patty's husband is at the helm of the check out and finances.

"We don't want people or their animals to be scared of coming to the veterinarian," says Dr. Patty. She's both amused and pleased that several people stay and talk to one another, sometimes relaxing on Shipton's Big R benches after their business is done. "People like to do things with their pets," she observes. "It has the flavor of a social event."

Win-Win-Win

Dr. Patty didn't have to ask Shipton's Big R twice to see if they were interested in the unusual marketing collaboration. Its general manager, Brian Cagle, had worked in another farm and ranch supply store in Colorado where he'd seen the popularity of convenient walk-up vaccination clinics.

"Dr. Patty's clinics are a win-win-win," observes Cagle. The consumer gets vet care with convenience and economy. Dr. Patty gets a ready and eager (although not always well-

behaved) clientele and Shipton's Big R builds its pet supply market share. "Lots of folks who might not otherwise afford vet services take advantage of Dr. Patty's monthly clinics," he says, obviously pleased with the arrangement.

Dr. Patty has ready evidence of the need for her Saturday clinics. After nearly two years, the crowds have yet to abate. "I've only seen two cases of distemper in dogs in my career. One case showed up at Shipton's Big R last winter." At another Saturday clinic, a dog owner profusely thanked Dr. Patty for recommending a rattlesnake vaccine.

"Sure enough, he got bit by a rattler," says the man in Wrangler jeans and a beat up straw hat of his beloved farm dog. "He slept for a couple of days and ate very little, but other than that, the ol' snake barely slowed him down. Amazing. Just amazing."

"Can we use your dog as an advertisement?" Dr. Patty says, patting the owner on the back for taking preventive measures that likely saved his dog's life.

Finding her Niche

Sometime ago, Dr. Patty found herself at a career crossroads when her corporate job as an agricultural veterinarian came to end because of the slowing national economy. Forty-something with young twins of her own, Dr. Patty weighed her options. Asking herself what she valued, she envisioned returning to veterinary medicine in a more personal way, beyond the walls of a clinic exam room.

So, on her work days when she is not organizing a Shipton's Big R clinic, Dr. Patty, who works in jeans and sturdy boots, topped with a fleece pullover in cooler weather, goes where her pet patients live, whether in fine homes in northwest Billings or modest dwellings on the city's outskirts. She traded overhead expenses and the limitations of office hours for a well-travelled Subaru station wagon filled with vet supplies.

Dr. Patty discovered that practicing veterinary medicine in pet owner's homes has its benefits. It gives her an insight that she might not witness in a typical clinic. She's found her niche. "I get to know the animal and family in their home environment. It's a more intimate view. It's more convenient and less stressful for everyone." Whether serving a busy mom with four kids and three cats or an elderly man in convalescent care with a small dog, Dr. Patty can quickly assess the owner's limitations and the animal's environment and make sure the animals get just the right care.

"It's a view I wouldn't get in a clinic setting," she said. "Animals often stay in the room to visit when I'm done treating them. It's refreshing and endearing."

"There's very little done in an exam room that can't be done at home," says Dr. Patty. "If there is a need for x-rays, I refer them to a clinic. If surgery is required, I have access to a fully equipped surgical suite." Dr. Patty fills in for local vets who are on vacation. "I've found a cooperative, generous spirit among businesses and professionals," she admits. "It is all circular." Her attitude sums up her entrepreneurial spirit. "It's not all about the money. I want to be proud of what I do."

Sometimes, when she goes on house calls, Dr. Patty takes her children, now approaching adolescence. "It is good for children to see parents working. It is good for my

inspired gifts

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children to see how other people live and learn that all people and their pets deserve to be treated with dignity."

Final Choices

Of all the calls Dr. Patty makes, the ones involving dying pets are the hardest. Yet, she maintains that those involving end of life care are often the most appreciated by clients.

There is a reverence in Dr. Patty's voice as she speaks of these difficult times. "Making end of life choices is very hard. As the doctor and the owner, we have come to the realization that the pet's illness or condition is not going to go away and the animal is not going to recover. It's a gift we can give to our animals that we can't give each other."

When a family can say good-bye to a beloved animal in the privacy of their home, it is "just better," believes Dr. Patty, even though for her, the experience is emotionally taxing. "It's about not being afraid of the end of life," she says.

After being down-sized, "I had to look at what I could do and what I was willing to do," reflects Dr. Patty. "I'm not sure I'd be so lucky in my other job. I can be flexible enough to work around my children's schedules. My family, clients and friends have allowed me to have a luxury job." **YVW**

Dr. Patty welcomes new clients. She can be reached at 406-839-5763 or at www.AHomeVet.com. Shipton's Big R outdoor clinics are on the second Saturday of every month. Downtown outdoor clinic hours are 10A – 12P. West End hours are 2P – 4P.



Virginia Bryan is happiest writing stories, walking her dog, Butch, on Norm's Island, watching her daughter, Ellie, run or listening to her son, Wyatt, sing rap. She chairs the High Plains Book Awards committee, a project of Parnly Billings Library. She is completing her nonfiction thesis as an MFA student at the University of New Orleans.