

BREAKING POINT

A worldwide veterinarian shortage stretches Whitehorse practices thin

By Rhiannon Russell

When Matt Allen and Amanda Breuer started working at Alpine Veterinary Medical Centre in Whitehorse, they wondered if there was enough work to sustain their jobs. More than 10 years ago, the clinic was very quiet—Allen had two or three appointments each day. On one of the couple's first Christmas Eves in town, Alpine staff played board games to pass the time. "That idea is now laughable, like that would never in a million years happen," Allen says. "We have between 10 and 20 emergencies walk through the door every single day."



Matt Allen checks out a dog at Alpine Veterinary Medical Centre.



It used to be easy to get a same-day appointment at Alpine. Not anymore. The clinic books three months out for routine visits, like exams, spays and neuters, and vaccines. While Alpine keeps openings for emergency visits and euthanasias, those usually fill up days in advance. Surgeries must be scheduled two months ahead of time. There's a 250-pet-long waitlist for dental care. Allen, now one of the practice's owners, is contending with a staff shortage, burnt-out employees, and more complaints than he's ever received. "We're honestly servicing more clients and patients than we can handle."

Whitehorse's veterinary clinics are at a breaking point, but it's not just a territorial problem. Across North America, the pandemic caused a surge in pet ownership, as well as a backlog in routine appointments. This dovetailed with a worldwide vet shortage that's been brewing for years. The Canadian Occupational Projection System predicts a vet shortage in this country through to 2031, with a total of 5,000 job openings and only 4,300 job seekers during this time.

Canada's five vet schools haven't been graduating enough students to meet

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the swelling demand. Add to the mix some changes in the veterinary profession. Pet owners want to be more involved in their animals' care, and improvements in technology and diagnostics mean vets tend to spend more time with each patient. Decades ago, particularly in rural communities, a vet would be on the clock all the time—they'd be called in the middle of the night to look at a sick cow or approached at the grocery store about a pregnant dog.

But in recent years, there's been a growing awareness of just how important vets' mental health is. A 2019 American study found male veterinarians were 2.1 times more likely to die by suicide than the general population, and female vets were 3.5 times more likely. Today, fewer vets are willing to forego work-life balance—and that's a good thing.

Amid the national shortage, recruitment in rural, remote places like Whitehorse is a particular challenge. Veterinarians here say they're doing their best to find staff and see as many pets and livestock as they can, but they can't sustain this pace.



In 2021, Candace Stuart decided to stop seeing new patients at her Whitehorse practice, All Paws Veterinary Clinic. She's been under-staffed for years, though she long felt compelled to fit every animal in, no matter what. First, Stuart tried making appointments shorter and fitting in more patients every hour. She accommodated more pet drop-offs, keeping cats and dogs in crates at the clinic to be seen whenever a vet could fit them in throughout the day. Once there were more animals than crates, though, that began to feel unsafe. Stuart and her staff were working 12- to 15-hour days. "Then it became a problem where we just weren't actually feeling like we were doing the best possible job we could for our clients and our patients," she says.

When Stuart opened All Paws, in 2010, about 70 per cent of her practice was dogs. Since then, the Yukon's horse community has grown substantially, she says, and more people have livestock farms. The demand for large-animal healthcare, which usually requires farm visits, has grown as a result. "I can't actually go see your food animal three hours from here," Stuart says, because of how busy she is in Whitehorse. She also used to drive to Yukon communities for spays, neuters, and vaccinations. (While Dawson City has a veterinarian, no other communities do.) She doesn't have time for that anymore either.

Stuart hears people say "all the time" that Whitehorse needs a third vet clinic. But the issue isn't the lack of clinics—it's the lack of vets. Stuart has struggled with recruitment since 2018. She employs three vets, though one is on parental leave as of this fall. Two years ago, there was a cause for hope: a Europe-trained vet moved to Whitehorse and decided she wanted to join All Paws. Though she'd worked in Europe



Photo: archbould.com

for 15 years, she'd have to spend three to five years getting Canadian accreditation. "I'm like, 'I can't pay you for three to five years to not be a vet,'" Stuart says. The vet returned to Europe.

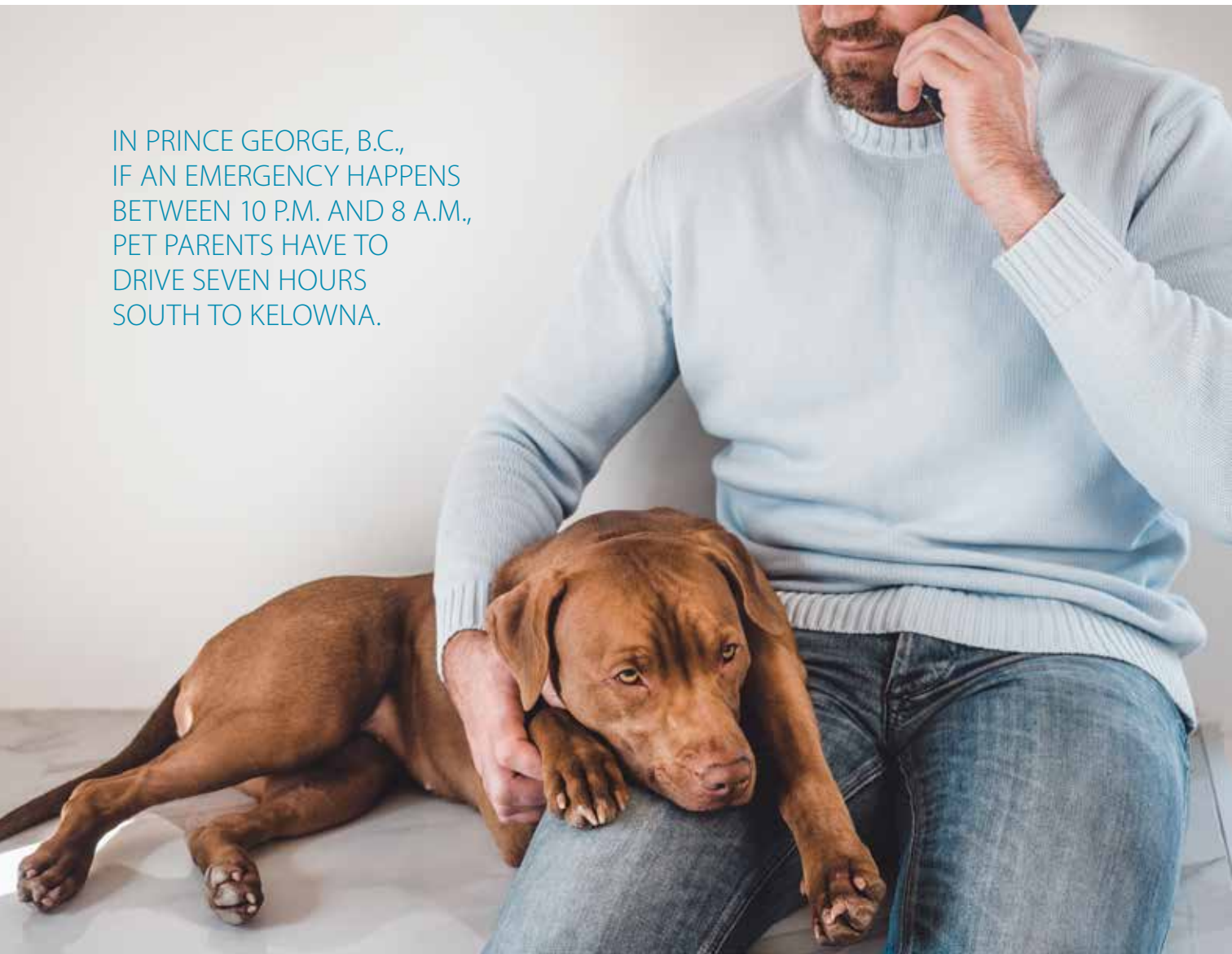
At Alpine, Allen has had job postings up for over a year with no applicants—even though the clinic is partly owned by National Veterinary Associates, which has a strong recruitment team. At its peak, the clinic had 10 vets. Two have since retired and two moved away. Six isn't near enough. Both clinics bring up vet students for externships, a required part of their schooling. With each batch, Stuart and Allen hope some of them will fall in love with the Yukon and decide to move here once they graduate.

The absence of emergency clinics, though, can be a deterrent. Down south, after-hours clinics handle calls and crises after daytime practices close. At both Alpine and All Paws, vets take turns being on-call overnight. If a call comes in at 3 a.m. for a sick cat or injured horse, that's up to the on-call vet

Above: Candace Stuart gets down to Eira's level in an examination room at All Paws.

CANDACE STUART HEARS PEOPLE SAY "ALL THE TIME" THAT WHITEHORSE NEEDS A THIRD VET CLINIC. BUT THE ISSUE ISN'T THE LACK OF CLINICS—IT'S THE LACK OF VETS.

IN PRINCE GEORGE, B.C., IF AN EMERGENCY HAPPENS BETWEEN 10 P.M. AND 8 A.M., PET PARENTS HAVE TO DRIVE SEVEN HOURS SOUTH TO KELOWNA.



to handle. That can be intimidating for a young vet. “A lot of new grads want to work where there’s an emerge clinic,” Allen says.

The decision to maintain after-hours emergency services shows local vets’ dedication to providing care—even though it contributes to burnout. In Prince George, B.C., if an emergency happens between 10 p.m. and 8 a.m., pet parents have to drive seven hours south to Kelowna. To better shoulder the Yukon’s after-hours load, All Paws and Alpine recently announced that they’ll be taking turns working on-call emergency shifts.

The fact that Yukon vets see both companion animals and livestock can also be a turnoff for new graduates. Most choose to specialize in small animals, so the thought of having to perform healthcare on livestock is nerve-wracking and unappealing. Factor in the cost of housing in the Yukon and there aren’t many people keen to relocate.

The Canadian Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA) has been vocal about the problems facing the industry. It’s formed a workforce advisory group to come up with solutions and has called on the federal government to recruit more foreign-trained vets and establish a testing centre for internationally educated vets to get more people into the profession faster.

A big piece of the puzzle is how vet schools operate. They’re very competitive and require high grades and hours of volunteer service. At most of Canada’s five schools, there are twice as many applicants as there are positions—in some cases, three times as many, says Timothy Arthur, CVMA president.

The five schools—in Prince Edward Island, Quebec, Ontario, Saskatchewan, and Alberta—graduate a total of about 350 vets each year, which isn’t enough to meet the need. In the last two years, provincial governments have increased funding and schools are either upping class sizes or setting more seats aside for Canadian students, though these vets won’t hit the workforce until four years down the road.

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JULIANNA CAMPBELL LOVES HELPING PEOPLE AND THEIR PETS, WHETHER IT'S AN ALPACA THAT WAS MYSTERIOUSLY SCALPED IN THE NIGHT OR A DAWSON CITY DOG THAT RECOVERED FROM AN ABSCESS.

The Yukon's chief veterinary officer, Mary Vanderkop, is aware of the challenges local vets face. She's part of a national group of chief veterinary officers that's investigating how to increase the labour force. Her group supports streamlining the process for foreign-trained vets and expanding the scope of veterinary technicians—making them more like a registered nurse than a licensed practical nurse.

In the interim, both Whitehorse clinics use locum vets. Akin to locum doctors in human healthcare, these professionals come up to work for a few weeks or months at a time. Both clinics have adopted Animal HealthLink, an Alberta-based after-hours telephone triage service created during the pandemic. Patients speak with a vet tech, who helps them determine if their pet is critically ill and needs to see a vet in person. The service has reduced the number of patients All Paws vets see after-hours by 60 or 70 per cent, Stuart says.

Could the Yukon government launch a recruitment campaign, trying to entice southern vets to come north? Or encourage Yukon teenagers to study vet medicine, in hopes they'd come home after graduation to work? In the past, Vanderkop says, some jurisdictions paid school tuition on the condition that the vet return to the community to work for a predetermined period of time. But these arrangements, she says, can take advantage of someone in financial need. Vanderkop has also heard, in years past, of communities owning and outfitting a vet clinic, then hiring a vet to run the practice, so the vet didn't have to deal with the work and cost of building the clinic.

Somewhat indirectly, the Yukon government supports vets through two initiatives. For farmers raising food-production animals, the Veterinary Services Program provides free telemedicine and up to \$1,000 per year for private vet visits. The government also covers the first \$300 of female dogs' spays in Yukon communities. While these are positive programs, neither addresses the vet shortage—or vets' lacking capacity to visit farms and communities. In October, Alpine announced it could no longer guarantee after-hours care for large animals and would be reducing these services during regular business hours as well.

Vanderkop says she'd welcome suggestions about how the government could offer more support. "We know, though, that the clinics here are just so strapped for even being able to deal with the demands of their clientele, which is what makes them money, let alone having to sit back and come up with ideas about how to have it operate better."



Some of the team at All Paws poses with an alpaca patient. One of the things that can intimidate new vets in the Yukon is the thought of treating large animals they may not have much experience with.

Three years into her vet career, being burnt out is all Julianna Campbell really knows. Raised in Whitehorse, she graduated from the University of Melbourne in Australia and now works at Alpine, where her family took their pets when she was a kid. A great thing about working up here, Campbell says, is that you get to do things you'd never have the opportunity to do down south, where specialists are plentiful and accessible. Up here, vets have to handle all sorts of ailments, like plating broken legs, removing a gallbladder or kidney, and treating diabetic ketoacidosis. As a result, Campbell has the experience of a vet who's been in the industry for five or six years.

At the clinic, the workload is intense. "Sometimes I'm here at three or four in the morning with a dog from Alaska, and then I have to be back for an appointment at 7:30 a.m. and then work a full shift," Campbell says. If a vet is exhausted after being on call, they're allowed to go home. But, she says, they all know the schedule is packed for months and that re-scheduling appointments will push things even further back for clients.

Campbell grew up with two dogs, a hamster, a tree frog, and a rabbit. As a five-year-old, she drew a picture of herself saying, "I want to be a vet," surrounded by animals. She loves helping people and their pets, whether it's an alpaca that was mysteriously scalped in the night or a Dawson City dog that miraculously recovered from an abscess. She wants Yukoners to know that she and her colleagues are working as hard as they can. "We truly are trying our best to the point where people are burning out and not able to function and come to work anymore," she says. "I love what I do. I wish, in a way, that there was more that I could do while doing less." ■

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