

ACCES for Pet Health

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Veterinary Specialists: 10,000 hours of training for your pets' health



By Beth Davidow, DVM DACVECC

I recently read *Outliers* by [Malcolm Gladwell](#). This book is an examination of what makes someone successful. One of the points of the book is that some people we consider great due to innate abilities or intelligence really succeeded because they put in an enormous number of hours training and practicing in a short period of time. Two examples were the Beatles and Bill Gates of Microsoft. The Beatles, prior to their American debut, had several years where they performed almost 8 hours a day, 6-7 days a week in clubs in Hamburg, Germany. Bill Gates spent most of his summers and evenings in high school in one of the largest computer labs around at that time. The number of hours it seems to take to reach expert status is about 10,000.

I found this interesting for a lot of reasons. One is thinking about how long it takes to reach this number. If you work 40 hours a week at your job, 50 weeks a year, that works out to be 2000 hours a year practicing your craft. Thus, if you are doing the same job, it probably realistically takes 5 years to be exceptional at what you do. It takes longer if you are part time, if you take vacations, or if you switch jobs or professions. This innately makes sense to me. I remember feeling in my 5th year as a veterinarian that it just wasn't quite as hard as it used to be.

However, in most veterinary practices, you don't do exactly the same thing every hour, every day. In emergency medicine, some days you see lots of animals who ate toxins, other days you suture wounds, another you may be surgically removing a bleeding tumor. The variety tests your ability to triage quickly, and means that you have to be competent at a lot of different skills, but an expert in none. The expertise of an emergency doctor is the ability to act and think quickly on your feet and know when you need outside help. This need for expertise in specific areas is why veterinary specialty practice complements emergency and ICU practice.



At ACCES, Dr Beth Herman is one of 2 Internists with thousands of hours of training and experience in her specialty.

Clients often ask me, what is a [veterinary specialist](#)? And why is your surgeon (or internist or radiologist) recommended over my regular veterinarian? I think the 10,000 hours is what is different. A veterinary boarded specialist, just like a human medical specialist, spent an intense 3-4 years in a residency training program doing only their specialty. The residencies are usually not 40 hours per week, but 60 hours, which is closer to 3000 hours a year, and close to those 10,000 hours by the time the residency is finished. Once that specialist is finished with their training, they must pass an exam demonstrating that they really have not only put in the time but really learned the necessary knowledge base to be considered an expert. Finally, once in practice, their practice is narrowed just to that specialty area, further adding to a quick accumulation of hours under their belt in their given discipline.

Your regular veterinarian has their own strengths. They, just like your primary care doctor, are there to be in charge of the whole picture and to make sure that your pets' maintenance health needs are taken care of-not just the most complex problem at the moment. The challenge in human health care *and* in veterinary health care is in making sure that collaboration between primary care clinician, emergency doctors, and specialists is valued so that clients and patients get the strength of each person's 10,000 hours.

Posted by [Christina Ryan](#) at September 3, 2009 12:00 a.m.

[Return to Veterinary Specialists: 10,000 hours of training for your pets' health](#)