

From puppies to people

Weedon understands link
between veterinary and
public health concerns.



PHOTO BY LAURA JOHNSTON

Dr. Bob Weedon spent the Christmas holiday of 2006 as he often has over the years, working in his veterinary hospital in Wilmington, N.C. Things are usually slow then, but this year was different. The condition of a puppy admitted to the clinic with a broken leg in early December had worsened considerably and the staff, who'd named the puppy "Johnny," was mystified. Weedon suggested they test the dog for rabies.

His hunch led to the diagnosis of the first case of canine rabies in New Hanover County in more than 50 years and initiated a hemisphere-wide, \$400,000 effort to corral and inoculate the 50 or so individuals who'd encountered Johnny during his time in the clinic. "We had quite a party in the ER that night," he recalls, referring to the number of people needing vaccinations.

Such events have become a hallmark of Weedon's career. A Wilmington veterinarian for more than 25 years, he is the senior partner at the College Road Animal Hospital. His clinical, case-based focus has expanded to include a public health perspective. In

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the process, he has become a leader in both arenas. “I enjoy contributing to the community and putting something back in the system,” he says.

Although he credits his undergraduate advisor at Purdue, Martin Stob, for instilling in him an inclination toward community service, it was an auspicious meeting in 2001 with Dr. Jean McNeil that set Weedon on his current population-based path. McNeil, the animal control services manager for New Hanover (N.C.) County Health Department, was looking for someone to help craft a system to ensure that adopted animals were spayed or neutered. Together, they developed a plan to have animals transferred directly to private veterinary clinics for surgical sterilization before being placed in homes. But the plan resulted in a delay that proved a disincentive to adoption. What was needed to reduce that delay was an on-site spay/neuter facility. So in 2001, at McNeil’s invitation, Weedon joined a team at the University of North Carolina’s Management Academy for Public Health (see page 7), a program of the North Carolina Institute for Public Health, charged with developing a business plan for such a facility. The county subsequently approved the plan developed by the team and built the facility, which soon saw a dramatic increase in adoption numbers and a 100 percent spay/neuter compliance rate.

A proponent of life-long learning, Weedon began to consider pursuing a master’s degree in public health. Hollie Pavlica, an advisor for the Management Academy (see page 7) and a graduate and faculty member of UNC’s Public Health Leadership Program (PHLP), encouraged him to consider PHLP, which offers public health certificates and degree programs in traditional and distance learning formats (see page 7). “He was really committed to making a difference in his community,” she remembers, “and he wanted to learn as much as he could.”

Weedon elected first to enroll in the School’s Core Concepts in Public Health

Certificate program—a 15-credit program offered in an online format (see www.sph.unc.edu/nciph/certificate). “It had been 20 years since I’d really done anything ‘academic,’” he says, “and I didn’t want to flunk out of a master’s program.” He soon distinguished himself in his certificate courses, and went on to get his master of public health with the Public Health Leadership Program in 2005.

“I couldn’t, and wouldn’t, have done it without the distance approach,” he says.

“Our friends jokingly refer to my wife and me as a quadra-career couple.” (Sami Winter is a veterinarian as well as a competitive dance instructor and judge.) “If I had tried to do the MPH in a quasi-residence program, even a weekend program, it would have been virtually impossible.”

Since his graduation, Weedon has become increasingly involved in public health concerns in his New Hanover County community. He is an adjunct professor at the University of North Carolina-Wilmington, where he teaches a course in Epidemiology and one called “Animals and Human Society,” which he developed. ▶▶

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PHOTO BY LAURA JOHNSTON

Dr. Bob Weedon (above), a veterinarian in Wilmington, N.C., and faculty adviser and adjunct professor in the Department of Biology and Marine Biology at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington (UNCW), gives a rabies vaccination to a cat at a no-cost rabies clinic co-hosted by the UNCW Pre-Veterinary Medical Association in partnership with New Hanover County Animal Control as part of World Rabies Day on Sept. 8, 2007. Weedon (left) receives a “kiss” from “Tommy” in spring 2006 to celebrate the UNCW Pre-Veterinary Medical Association’s installation of stations that hold baggies for people to pick up animal waste while walking their pets on the UNCW campus. Weedon is a graduate of the UNC School of Public Health’s Public Health Leadership Program, Southeast Public Health Leadership Institute and Management Academy for Public Health.

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▶ “The two real professional loves of my life are veterinary medicine and education. Nothing gives me more pleasure than to see a student ‘get it,’” he says, adding that he’s been thrilled to see his students go on to experience success in the veterinary and public health fields.

Weedon was appointed to New Hanover County’s Board of Health in January 2005—while still completing his MPH—and in 2007 was elected vice chairman. He is also a 2007 graduate of the Southeast Public Health Leadership Institute, a program administered by the School’s North Carolina Institute for Public Health (see page 7).

Weedon and McNeil now organize an annual public health forum for the local veterinarian community on specific issues like rabies awareness. Most recently, he has spearheaded an effort to monitor the quality of the county’s water supply, an endeavor involving the New Hanover County Health Department, the County Commissioners, and UNC-Wilmington. “We’ve ruffled some feathers,” he admits. “Learning how to play the political game has been an important aspect of my education, because you may know how you think it should be done, you may know how you want to do it, but getting elected officials to see what you see can be a challenge.”

Weedon foresees many more opportunities for leadership, given his particular interests and skills developed through the four separate UNC School of Public Health programs he’s completed. “Of the top eight infectious bioterrorism agents,” he notes, “seven of them are zoonotic diseases (transmitted between animals and people)—bird flu, tuberculosis, West Nile virus, anthrax, botulism, Ebola and plague.

“This illustrates the importance of veterinary medicine being involved in the public health community,” he says. “Ultimately, I’d like to finish my career doing something at the state or federal level, perhaps in policy development or bioterrorism preparedness—something that would impact a larger section of the population. When the right thing comes along, I’ll know it, and I’ll jump on it.” ■

– BY PAUL FRELICK