

Heals on wheels

The house call – that nostalgic courtesy immortalized in Norman Rockwell paintings – is back. This time for dogs. And while home visits by the vet are costly, they could be the perfect prescription for stressed out pooches.

C Caesar and Cleopatra hate going to the vet – but they don't mind when the vet comes to them. Though somewhat aloof (and geriatric), Caesar greets Dr. Lawrence Putter with a cautious nuzzle, while Cleopatra slobbers the doc with kisses.

House calls are standard fare for these pampered Park Avenue pooches, who live and eat well. (These are celeb chef Daniel Boulud's dogs, by the way.) On a recent arctic day, Caesar, a Coton de Tulear, lounged on the glass dining room table and had his teeth examined.

"Have you been brushing?" Dr. Putter asks Daniel's wife, Micky Boulud. "The tartar is building up again."

Before Boulud can answer, Cleopatra, a Tibetan Terrier, interrupts the exam because she wants a piece of the action. Up she bounds, as Dr. Putter is forced to poke and prod this shaggy shock of white fluff.

"This is so much easier and so much more humane," says Boulud, adding that waiting to be seen at the New York Animal Medical Center used to traumatize her and the dogs.

House calls had gone the way of the milkman – but they're making a comeback.

"In New York, you get your pizza and dry cleaning delivered, so why not your veterinarian?" says Dr. Putter, who runs Vet to the Pet (vet2thepet.com) and Lenox Hill Veterinarians.

In Manhattan and beyond, the good doctor is at your pet's service. House calls are retro in the metro, where dog lovers are looking to reduce stress (their own and their pooch's) and to make life more convenient. Doctors who visit charge a premium, spend more time with you and Fido, and become someone you put on speed dial.

"Georgie used to get upset when I took her to the vet," says Upper West Sider Joan Scott about her Shih Tzu/Maltese mix. "Now that the vet comes to see her, she is happy, and so am I."

Word of mouth is usually the best way to find a vet who makes house calls. Some are listed in the Yellow Pages or can be found online.

Do your homework and check the vet's credentials with the American Veterinary Medical Association (avma.org), as well as the status of their license with New York State (op.nysed.gov or opsearches.htm).

At \$95 to \$165 for a 40-minute exam, you're paying a lot for a home visit. But can you put a price tag on stress reduction and kindness?

"Dogs know when they're going to the vet," says Vet on Wheels Dr. Shirley Koshi, who splits her time between house calls and New York Veterinarian Hospital. "They put their brakes on. They shiver and shake. During a house call, you can ease a dog's anxiety."

At a glance

How to Find a Vet

- Word of mouth
- Yellow Pages
- Surf the Web

Price for a Home Visit

Ranges from \$75 to \$165 in Manhattan; more for the other boroughs and beyond

Be Safe:

Check with the American Veterinary Medical Association (avma.org) to make sure the doctor is legit

What House-Call Vets Can Do:

- General exams
- Take blood
- Give vaccines
- Diagnostics

Go to the Hospital When There Is:

- Nonstop bleeding or vomiting
- Difficulty breathing
- Neurological impairment
- Limping or lameness

“Now that the vet comes to see her, she is happy and so am I.”



Dr. Jeff Levy greets Joan Scott and Georgie, a Shih Tzu/Maltrese mix, at their Upper West Side apartment.

Take the nervous Terrier mix Dr. Koshi treats at home. When the doctor arrives, she heads to the couch and butters up the dog w/ah petting and canoodling. Acting casual, she examines his eyes, ears, and skin.

“When I bring out the stethoscope, he gets edgy, so I give him liver or Milk-Bone treats,” Dr. Koshi says. “The idea is to keep the tension low so the dog doesn’t stress out.”

This kind of love fest is a lot harder to pull off at a vet’s office. That’s why house-call vets tend to become an important part of everyone’s life, the dog and the guardian alike.

“There is a huge security in knowing that your vet knows who you are, especially when you call in a moment of distress,” says Daniel Boulud. “Dr. Putter was able to calm me down after Caesar ate a pencil. He assured us it was okay and recommended some medication to make it pass out of his system.”

For elderly, infirm pets or those easily spooked by the city’s chaotic cacophony, a house call is like *nanna* from heaven. Sometimes that’s true even for a dog owner.

Dr. Putter sees a Newfie in SoHo who has trouble walking. “Nobody can carry Elvis,” he says.

So, a home visit might be the only way for Elvis to get taken care of on a regular basis.

House-call vets pull a host of services out of their little black bags — but there are limitations. They can do general exams, inject vaccines, and take skin tests and blood pressure — they can even administer chemotherapy treatment in some cases. They also perform euthanasia, which is a big comfort to those who want their animals to die in dignity at home.

More complex treatment requires an office visit. When clients are unsure, house-call vets do telephone triage to determine the best course of action. Good reasons to head to a hospital or clinic include unstoppable bleeding or vomiting, difficulty breathing, and signs of neurological impairment, such as disorientation, limping, or lameness.

House-call vets who work at clinics, or those with privileges at hospitals are able to treat dogs at home and at the office. Not all house-call vets perform surgery, and most are not available for emergencies. When they can’t be there for you, they refer you to the right physician and stay informed about your dog’s case.

“Continuity is extremely important,” says Dr. Jeffrey Levy of House Calls for Your Pet (housecallsforyourpet.com). “With a house-call doctor, you always see the same doctor: me. When the dog needs a specialist, I stay informed and do the follow-up.”

Visiting vets have a diagnostic advantage because they see where and how a dog lives. They observe where a dog sleeps, hangs out, eats. Vets at clinics often miss important clues to behavioral problems because pet owners are not always honest about the home environment.

Dr. George Korin, who runs A House Call Service (vet-housecalls.com), got to the bottom of a Wheaten Terrier’s itchy skin by opening the kitchen cupboard and reading labels on the food bags.

“When an animal has a skin condition, I like to know what he’s eating,” Dr. Korin says. “In this case, I discovered his food was okay, but a special wheat-based treat was causing the reaction.” The owner not only changed treats, but also learned to avoid wheat for his dog.

Personalized service in today’s fast-paced, anonymous world goes a long way.

Micky Boulud couldn’t agree more. “It’s a shame human doctors don’t make house calls,” she says. ■



Above: Dr. Levy’s black bag of tricks. Right: Dr. Lawrence Putter examines Caesar, Micky and Daniel Boulud’s Coton de Tulear.