

Aiding animal health in remote communities

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By Lynne Gunville



A young resident brings his kitten to the remote animal health clinic held in Keeseekoose First Nation. Community representatives David Kakakaway and Helen Quewezance are in the background. Photo: Dr. Emily Jenkins.

This fall, volunteers from the Western College of Veterinary Medicine (WCVN) took part in two remote animal health clinics — one in Keeseekoose First Nation in southeastern Saskatchewan and the other serving the Onion Lake Cree Nation north of Lloydminster, Sask.

The WCVN's involvement in clinics such as these is largely the result of ongoing research projects exploring canine overpopulation and health issues in rural, remote and Indigenous communities in the province.

The Keeseekoose clinic, which was held in October 2012, was a joint research and service remote animal health clinic, and the first at which the WCVN was the primary organizer.

“WCVN organized the animal health side of the clinic, offering basic veterinary services such as free or reduced cost vaccinations and deworming to animals brought to the clinic by community members,” explains [Dr. Emily Jenkins](#), an assistant professor in the college's Department of Veterinary Microbiology and cross-appointed with the School of Public Health.

In addition to jointly applying for grant money from the Indigenous Peoples' Health Research Centre along with the community, the WCVN engaged the Saskatchewan Veterinary Medical Association as well as local veterinary personnel. They also received donations from Bayer Animal Health and Pfizer Canada.

Veterinary services were provided by Jenkins and [Dr. Steve Kruzeniski \(WCVM '12\)](#), a veterinarian at the Animal Clinic of Regina and a Team North volunteer. The WCVM's volunteers included graduate students Janna Schurer and Stacey Elmore as well as Laura Hargreaves, previously a laboratory manager for the college's Department of Large Animal Clinical Sciences.

As local dogs received a physical exam, basic vaccinations and deworming, the team also collected blood samples from their patients. These samples will be tested as part of [Schurer's ongoing research](#) to determine the role of dogs as sentinels and sources of zoonoses such as Lyme disease and canine roundworm.

“Clinical histories and surveys done with local people will also help develop a better understanding of animal health concerns in the community,” says Jenkins. She adds that this information will be used to develop strategies for increasing the community's use of local veterinary services.

The clinic is one aspect of a joint animal-human health investigation that focuses on partnering with communities such as Keeseekoose in order to identify community research priorities and concerns. Over the past two years, WCVM investigators have worked with community members to address their concerns about dog aggression, unhealthy animals and disease transmission in Keeseekoose as well as in other nearby communities covered by Treaty 4.

“Clinics such as this one improve overall herd health, which is crucial for minimizing the transmission of zoonotic diseases and the spread of highly contagious animal diseases such as distemper and parvoviruses,” Jenkins explains.

In September 2012, volunteers from the WCVM were also invited to a spay-neuter clinic in Onion Lake where they teamed up with the [Canine Action Project \(CAP\)](#). This new, non-profit organization assists communities with stabilizing and managing health and welfare issues associated with their companion animal (particularly dog) populations.



Second-year veterinary student Andrea Pellegrino was part of the volunteer team that held a remote animal health clinic at the Onion Lake Cree Nation in September. Photo: Dr. Emily Jenkins.

Under the leadership of CAP director Kelly Phipps, the WCVM participants spent a weekend working with volunteers from the Lloydminster area. The WCVM team included Jenkins and Schurer as well as graduate student Jasmine Dhillon and second-year veterinary student [Andrea Pellegrino](#).

By working with organizations such as the CAP and Team North, the WCVM is helping to tackle the health issues of these remote and indigenous communities by combining clinical services with community-based research, says Jenkins.

The clinics enable graduate students to carry out community-based research while veterinary students get the chance to practise their technical skills and client communication.

“Most importantly, it’s a cultural experience in observing the socioeconomic determinants of health and really understanding how human and animal health are intertwined – a truly One Health experience.”

Jenkins is optimistic that ongoing discussions will lead to the development of an optional clinical rotation in which senior veterinary students can participate in these animal health and spay-neuter clinics as part of their curriculum at the WCVM.

Jenkins is also hopeful that the various organizations will eventually work together to provide a cohesive, sustainable and culturally sensitive approach to managing dog health and populations in the province’s remote and indigenous communities.

“By offering these services, we’re improving the health of animals and people in underserved area as well as encouraging them to access their local veterinary services by promoting the value of pets and vets.”