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Veterinarian Cindy Houlihan studies best in human medicine; adopts team approach to improve care for pets

When you visit Dr. Cindy Houlihan's Birmingham, Michigan clinic don't be surprised if you find her sitting on the floor chatting it up with one of her patients. And don't be surprised if the patient is rubbing up against Dr. Houlihan and meowing back.

This veterinarian is changing the practice of veterinary medicine in her own way by adopting new approaches to diagnosing and treating pet ailments as well as helping pet owners better understand their furry friends. Dr. Houlihan gets input from doctors and nurses at Beaumont Hospital in Royal Oak who bring their pets to her practice. For pets with heart conditions, she brings in a pet cardiologist. To help pet owners better understand their furry family members, she brings in a pet communicator. The result is an extraordinary approach to veterinary care that has pet lovers coming to The Cat Practice in Birmingham from as far away as Dearborn, Northville, Brighton and Grosse Pointe.

"Some people might think I am the pet whisperer," Dr. Houlihan says. "The truth is the power of listening is underrated. If a pet owner has a feeling that their pet is not right, 99 percent of the time they are correct. Veterinary medicine is as much intuition as it is science. Just like in human medicine, expensive tests can never replace listening to your patient."

The Cat Practice uses a team approach in which veterinarians, veterinary technicians and administrators come together to share information and provide comprehensive care for each pet. Each pet is examined and treated holistically taking into account the pet's overall health and wellbeing. Information and treatment options are shared with the pet's family including everything from pain management for pets who need it, to help with pet behavior issues, to hospice care for pets facing end of life.

In caring for her feline patients, Dr. Houlihan follows these principles:

- Respect all patients. No restraints, gentle handling and comfortable accommodations for pets that need hospitalization.
- Listen to the pet and owner. Take it seriously if "Fluffy is not acting right."
- Provide options for care. Instead of the doctor making the decision, provide information and alternatives so that the owner can decide what is right for his/her pet.
- Become the pet's advocate. Just as human patients need a representative, pets need someone to explain their side of the story; to understand their feelings and needs.
- Treat the pet AND the person. As more pets are thought of as family members, pet owners need attention in managing and in coping with their pet's condition or illness.

While an increasing number of women are training as veterinarians, Dr. Houlihan was one of the first women in metro Detroit to own a veterinary practice. She joined The Cat Practice in 1988, became a partner in 1992 and full owner along with her husband in 2001. The practice, which originally opened in 1981, is celebrating its 30th anniversary in 2011.

Dr. Houlihan received her doctor of veterinary medicine (DVM) and bachelor of science in microbiology from Michigan State University.