



**BACK TO WORK** Performing physical rehabilitation for guide dogs allows veterinary nurses to make a difference in the life of dogs and their pet parents.



**MEET THE AUTHOR**

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# Mending the Broken: Lifelong Learning Through Restoration

**A** credentials list for authors or speakers often looks more like alphabet soup. Readers or audience members are left to wonder meaning, only recognizing a subset. Are all these necessary? Where can I learn more? What drove this pathway for learning?

Kristen has been an RVT since 2002 and has multiple credentials related to physical rehabilitation and pain management. In 2012, Kristen helped form the Organizing Committee of the Academy of Physical Rehabilitation Veterinary Technicians and was recognized as a Veterinary Technician Specialty in Physical Rehabilitation in 2017. In 2018, Kristen was awarded the California Veterinary Technician of the Year award by the California Veterinary Technician Association. Her special interests include veterinary orthotics and prosthetics, geriatrics, sporting and performance, mobility and service dogs, and multidisciplinary pain management strategies.



On the other side, the long list of credentials is a testament to the commitment for lifelong learning. Each course attended imparts cutting-edge knowledge related to a personal career pathway. Writing and research assignments force students out of comfort zones, the tunnel vision often experienced in everyday clinical practice is expanded, relationships are built through new cohorts of colleagues, and ultimately, the lifelong learning elevates the standards of care provided for pets and pet owners.

Behind those letters is the story of my path as a Veterinary Technician Specialist in Physical Rehabilitation—one that started early in childhood, was refined through my training, and continues to be shaped through key experiences with patients and clients.

## DISCOVERING THE HUMAN-ANIMAL BOND

Early in my childhood I naturally gravitated toward animals who were sick or injured. I recall giving a senior golden retriever's sore feet massage therapy after a long day of playing ball at the beach. She hadn't moved for hours and was asleep under the dining room table. She seemed to be hurting and I felt compelled to do something. I had no idea what I was doing but clearly remember gently moving the toes through range of motion and stroking the large muscles of this pet. Her breathing slowed; muscles relaxed. After some time, she got up, shook her body, planted a kiss on my face, and trotted off to go outside. The visibly improved comfort resonated with me. I made a difference and she had thanked me. I made a connection with this animal that I could not explain at the time and now know as the human-animal bond.

This bond has grown tremendously in the past several decades with an increasing recognition of the depth of the emotional connection between humans and companion animals. In previous studies, a majority of pet owners indicated that they consider their pet a family member, refer to themselves as their pet's parent, and their animal is allowed to sleep in bed with them.<sup>1</sup> In one study, as many as 30% of pet parents rated their own grief over the death of a pet as "severe,"<sup>2</sup> which further supports the entanglement of animals and human emotional responses.

In the late 1990s, one of my first writings for a high school psychology class was titled "The Healing Power

Pets return to rehabilitation facilities frequently for years; this helps pet parents and the team members working with the pet develop a unique relationship.



of Pets." The career path I was on certainly was to include animals in some capacity, but ultimately, I was unsure to what extent. Upon the recommendation from the school counselor, I volunteered my time in various veterinary hospitals and non-profit organizations, with one in particular making such an impact that it determined my career pathway. That organization, Guide Dogs for the Blind, has been creating partnerships between people, dogs, and communities since 1942 with all services for clients provided free of charge, largely made possible by donors and volunteers.

## FINDING MY CALLING

I began my career in veterinary medicine doing summer internships in the veterinary department. During college, this transitioned to regularly volunteering to attain hours of experience in preparation for graduate school to become a veterinarian, but in my junior year that path changed. While volunteering, the foundations of veterinary medicine were imparted upon me and I realized how critical a veterinary nurse's role was to the team. I learned that if the surgical instruments were not properly cared for, the patient suffers. I learned that if the radiology suite was not properly cared for, my team members may be put in harm's way. I learned the value of communication with disabled clients and the critical role service dogs play in independence and mobility, with deviations resulting in disruption of the human-animal team and possible harm to both. The mentorship I received from the veterinary nurses and veterinarians was irreplaceable. They generously took the time to teach each task, imparted knowledge and skill, allowed me to make mistakes and learn from them, entertained new ideas, and entrusted me with the care of the dogs. The only expectation in return was to continue providing the highest level of care, bring innovation,



**LONG-TERM HEALING** Helping clients understand a pet's at-home recovery plan is an important part of rehabilitation.

and be humble. One innovation in particular shaped who I am today: elevating the post-operative recovery period for dogs after orthopedic surgery.

## THE POWER OF HEALING

In the early 2000s, before veterinarians formed the American Association of Rehabilitation Veterinarians and the American College of Veterinary Sports Medicine and Rehabilitation (ACVSMR) as a board specialty for veterinarians, physical rehabilitation for animals following orthopedic surgery was largely informal and limited to crate rest for several weeks. As an athlete myself competing in collegiate sports, I knew firsthand that recovery from an injury required rehabilitation in order to return to work. The guide dogs recovering from orthopedic surgery needed to get back to work, to their team, and it wasn't happening fast with leash walks. It was in that moment I realized we could be doing better, and my search began.

Somehow, I stumbled upon a rehabilitation credentialing program for veterinary professionals and set my sights on getting these dogs back to work. With the application of physical rehabilitation techniques and support from my colleagues, the dogs recovered and returned to work faster than expected for the time. This was quite an accomplishment as a newly registered veterinary technician, and I gained more than the successful rehabilitation of the dogs.

I gained compassionate listening skills and a deeper understanding of the human-animal bond.

## RISING TO THE OCCASION

Handlers of guide dogs were sometimes not equipped to care for a large breed dog recovering from orthopedic surgery in their home due to the environment, limited access to transportation without their guide, or personal physical disability, which required temporarily placing the dogs in a foster home.

This was often devastating to their emotional state and independence. Each week, the handler and I had detailed conversations about new exercises for the week, their quirky behaviors, sleeping patterns, what volunteer gave them extra snuggles for the day, and planning for the return home. My team gladly handed these difficult conversations over to me and I welcomed the test of patience that they often brought. In my career today, I do not see these humans as the "difficult" client and I welcome the challenge of having conversations that most of my colleagues would rather avoid.

While we invest our hearts and souls into saving every life we come across, pet parents are the driving force behind all that we do. In private practice, they drive business and support our careers while we tirelessly advocate for high standards of care. We create vulnerabilities in ourselves when a pet cannot be cured because of a terminal medical condition and internalize our apparent "failure." Pet parents can react to recommendations, diagnoses, and medical outcomes in ways that is best described as a spectrum.

If not recognized quickly, it becomes emotionally exhausting and, combined with long hours, existing debt, or feeling underutilized, can contribute to compassion fatigue and burnout. The large majority of pet parents welcome our professional recommendations and adhere to them like glue, but a subset become the highly educated advocate, unfortunately giving them the appearance of being combative, argumentative, and just plain old "difficult." These are my people.

Many factors contribute to professionals leaving the veterinary field, including burnout, economic stressors, shifting demographics, a lack of interest in or support for professional development, underutilization, and added pressure from pet parents.<sup>3</sup> What moves me in this profession is facing these challenges head-on through education, collaboration, and understanding



the tremendous bond between humans and animals. In 2012, I joined forces with several other credentialed veterinary technicians to form a specialty group focused on physical rehabilitation, now known as the Academy of Physical Rehabilitation Veterinary Technicians (APRVT). It is the mission of the APRVT to provide assistance in veterinary physical rehabilitation and encourage veterinary professionals and colleagues to further their education, all while improving the quality of animals' lives. The development of this organization was built on years of persistence and sacrifice as each of us has fought for what we believe in, advocating for the pets and their parents.

Pet parents seeking rehabilitation therapy come to improve the comfort and quality of life for their pet. They have invested countless hours learning their pets' medical condition and have thoughtfully prepared questions and concerns for their veterinarian. Rehabilitation services complement veterinary care, but more often than not, veterinary personnel are not prepared for the in-depth discussions and relationships to be had when working with animals in this specialty. We are often a pet's only hope for mobility and pain reduction and have access to a multitude of resources, such as traditional Chinese medicine, physical modalities (e.g., photobiomodulation, electrical stimulation, etc.), aquatic therapy, prosthesis and orthoses, regenerative medicine, and therapeutic exercise. Pets return to rehabilitation facilities frequently for years; this helps the pet parents and the team members working with the pet develop a unique relationship. Pet parent discussions tend to revolve frequently around changed social interactions, activities that can no longer be done because the pet's condition prevents it, preparing the family for a different life in terms of disability, and relying on multiple ongoing therapies to manage a medical condition.

## THE BIG PICTURE

It is here, in these important family discussions, where I am moved to stay in my chosen career path as a Veterinary Technician Specialist in Physical Rehabilitation. It is here where I can make a difference in the pet parent's emotional state, helping them understand their pet's veterinary diagnosis and prescribed treatment plan. It is here where I can take the time to realize that this pet is the only conduit for the person to socialize and we have become their social network. It is here where I can help my colleagues who see these pet parents as "difficult" to see them instead as

only trying to advocate for their furry family member and understand that compassion is warranted. It is here where we can all make a difference in the human-animal bond and develop relationships bigger than what we could have ever imagined in our professional lives.

My education is a lifelong journey and isn't always done in the classroom. By allowing pet parents to educate me on what *they* need has been life-changing and I encourage all veterinary nurses to do the same. **TVN**

## Suggested Reading

- Academy of Physical Rehabilitation Veterinary Technicians [aprvt.com](http://aprvt.com)
- Guide Dogs for the Blind, Inc. [guidedogs.com](http://guidedogs.com)

## References

1. APPMA. National pet owners survey (NPOS). Washington, DC: American Pet Products Manufacturers Association; 2005-2006.
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