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Sarah Law/Metroland

Dr. Mary DeCaire of the Centennial Animal Hospital in Bracebridge and her patient, Finn.

SHORTAGE OF VETERINARIANS FELT BY PET OWNERS

PET OWNERS FORCED TO TRAVEL FOR EMERGENCY CARE

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When Rhonda Way's dog Cocco started having a seizure at 6:30 p.m. on a weeknight, she didn't know what to do; all the local veterinary clinics were closed.

The Gravenhurst woman called around but the closest

place she could bring Cocco was Barrie.

Even Barrie's Huronia Veterinary Emergency Clinic was fully booked, so Cocco was brought to O'Sullivan Animal Hospital in Barrie and was treated there.

There was no one at the hospital to watch Cocco overnight though, so Cocco had to be trans-

ferred again to a veterinarian in Newmarket.

The eight-year-old chocolate lab has since recovered — but the scare started a conversation on social media about the lack of after-hours and emergency veterinary clinics in Muskoka.

Frustrated with her lack of options, Way posted a video of Cocco seizing on the local Facebook group Gravenhurst the Good and

received a huge response.

Many other pet owners shared similar stories of being in emergency situations and having to travel over an hour to get help. One woman even said her dog died on the way to an emergency clinic in Barrie.

A few years ago, Muskoka veterinarians partnered up to offer

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WHY ARE THERE NO AFTER-HOURS VET CLINICS IN MUSKOKA?

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an on-call service where clinics took turns offering after-hours care.

"I think a lot of people don't even realize that

there isn't that service anymore," said Way.

Lack of transportation creates a barrier to getting veterinary treatment outside Muskoka, she said.

And as Muskoka's popu-

lation grows alongside the surge in 'pandemic pets', the demands for veterinary services are increasing — which is why Way would like to see the on-call service return.

Dr. Mary DeCaire is a local veterinarian who has run Centennial Animal Hospital in Bracebridge and Gravenhurst Veterinary Services since the early 1980s.

She said there have been many changes in the veterinary field since she started, with regulated standards of practice veterinarians must follow in accordance with the Ontario Veterinary College.

This combined with a nationwide shortage of trained veterinarians and veterinary technicians — the equivalent of nurses — has affected what clinics can offer.

"If we had to provide by ourselves, emergency coverage for our patients, we wouldn't be able to continue to practice because there just aren't enough veterinarians to do appointments during the day and be on call all night," DeCaire explained.

"In the short term, there's nothing we can really do about it. (We're) trying to address government funding to veterinary colleges so that we can graduate more veterinarians, and to community colleges so that we can graduate more registered veterinary technicians," she said.

She said she used to have 10 full-time veterinarians at her practice and



Rhonda Way photo

Eva and her furry friend Cocco are inseparable. The eight-year-old lab has recently had medical problems and Eva's mother Rhonda says the lack of after-hours vet clinics in Gravenhurst is a challenge.

now has the equivalent of five.

Another challenge is that the cost of vet care has increased. DeCaire spent \$45 to get her first dog spayed when she was 16. Now, spaying costs 10 times as much due to inflation.

One thing that has helped since the pandemic is that vets can now offer telemedicine, which means some appointments can be held virtually with the use of photos and videos, she said.

DeCaire encourages all pet owners to purchase pet insurance to make emergency visits less stressful.

But with the lack of after-hours clinics in the region, Way said once Cocco "crosses the Rainbow Bridge," she won't be get-

ting another dog.

"As pet parents we love our animals and want them to be safe and well," said Way. "After-hours care of any kind is desperately needed in Muskoka."

"Hopefully, someone will see that — a vet that wants to retire up here and still work, or move up here and work, or someone fresh out of veterinary school with all the latest knowledge," she said.

STORY BEHIND THE STORY: When our reporter saw Rhonda Way's video of Cocco on social media, she decided to look into why Muskoka lacks after-hours clinics and the challenges facing the veterinary field to spread awareness about this issue.

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