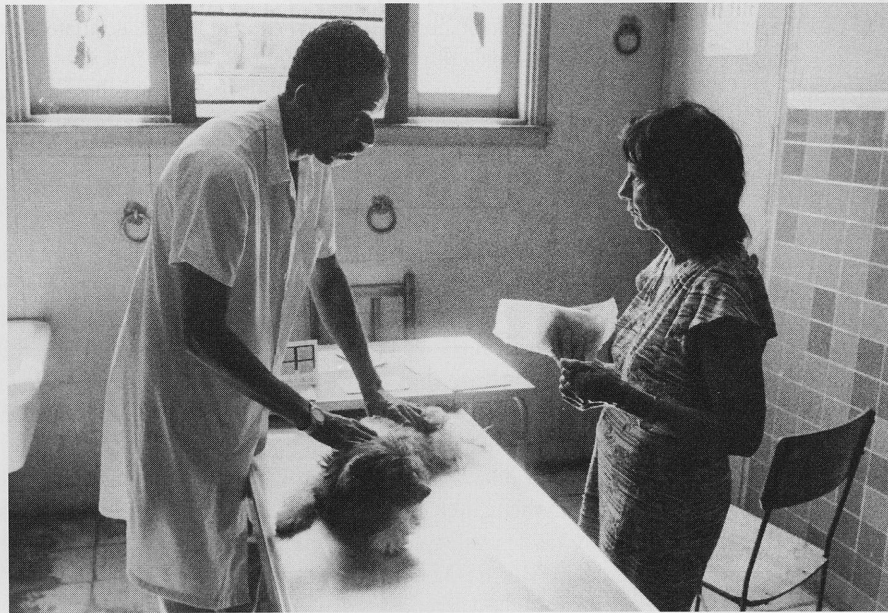


# ANIMALS ABROAD



Photographs: Paul C. Margolis

## ADAPTING TO ADVERSITY

by Paul C. Margolis

**T**he human-animal bond flourishes in even the most dire circumstances. In a country notorious for its rigid political climate and impoverishment, Cubans hold their feline and canine companions dear. Freelance writer Paul Margolis, allowed to visit the country in 1996 as a professional journalist, offers a rare look at one of Cuba's subsidized animal clinics.

At the Jose Callejas Animal Clinic in downtown Havana, veterinary surgeons perform operations bare-handed — there simply aren't enough latex gloves to go around. The dispensary often runs out of antibiotics and other prescription drugs. Medical equipment that looks like it should be in a museum — glass syringes, primitive cauteries and ancient bone saws — soldiers on because newer replacements can't be bought. Electricity outages and water system failures, two common occurrences, can play havoc with the schedule of veterinary services.

Like its universal health care system for humans, Cuba's veterinary care network suffers from economic hard times. Up-to-date veterinary products are not

generally available in Cuba, according to the clinic's Associate Director, Dr. Conrado Perez. For almost 35 years, most veterinary equipment and supplies have been imported from either Europe or Latin America.

Perez shows visitors nearly empty supply cabinets and equipment from the 1940's and 50's that have been patched up and kept in service as long as possible. He points to a line from which are hanging used surgical gloves and stained pieces of gauze that once had staunched blood. "You see," he says, "we have to re-use everything here. Elsewhere, I know that they just throw these things away after using them."

The clinic has six veterinarians on staff, and its facilities offer hands-on training for students from Havana's veterinary college. Examinations cost five pesos (about 1¢ U.S.) and medications generally are well under \$1. Surgery costs, at most, the equivalent of a few dollars.

Pets and owners stay in an open-sided sun shelter waiting area until they are called. Canine clients predominate, but cats and birds also are treated regularly. Examination rooms have no furniture other than a rickety desk and chairs and a stainless steel table; to save energy, often they are illuminated only by sunlight.

Operations are performed in the early morning, before the great heat of the day.

The air-conditioning hasn't functioned in years. Even so, by 10 A.M. the temperature is higher than 85 degrees in the windowless room. Two operations are in progress this morning: A hysterectomy is being performed on a 3-year-old German shepherd with a tumor, and a small dog who has been hit by a car is having a steel pin inserted into his hind leg so he can walk again.

"We have limited resources, but our doctors make up for the lack of sophisticated equipment with their skill," says Perez. Radiographs of the dog's leg are taped to the glass brick wall because the fluorescent tubes in the U.S.-made viewer have burned out long ago and new ones aren't available in Cuba. Scarce anaesthetic gases are available only for surgical procedures on humans, so animals must be anesthetized by the riskier spinal injection method. Despite the primitive conditions and limited resources, Perez reports that the Clinic boasts a recovery rate for surgery better than 95 percent.

Dr. Irelio Faba, Clinic Director, sums up the philosophy behind the care these veterinarians provide.

"We don't consider our services to be a luxury," Faba explains. "Pets are important for people's mental health and well-being, so by treating pets, we are helping people, too." 