



# How (and why) to Choose a Quality Veterinarian

by Kathy Thom with  
**Dr. Christine Stevenson, DVM**  
*Photos by Kathy Thom*

## PART 1: Just “Any Old Vet” Won’t Do

I’ve owned and loved five Miniature Schnauzers over the last twenty-two years. My first two had serious health issues most of their lives; unfortunately I’ve had to learn the “hard way” about what makes a good veterinarian.

My first vet I had known for many years prior to even having a dog of my own. We lived in a small rural town in Minnesota. He made himself available any hour of the day or night regardless of the time; the animals’ health came first. I recall waking him up several times in the middle of the night with an emergency.

On one occasion, our first schnauzer was unable to urinate. He’d had stones prior to this and I knew a total blockage was something to watch for. I called the vet and he told me to come *right now*. He was waiting for me, holding the clinic door open as I arrived at 4 p.m., ready to rush my dog into surgery. The front reception area had several clients waiting for appointments, but he quickly explained the situation and told them they’d have to reschedule. Corky nearly died because the surgery was so complicated. My vet stayed at the clinic the following two nights monitoring his condition before he’d release him. For a small town vet with minimal equipment, he was the best.

Years later we had moved to another small town not far away and I began working at the local vet clinic there. They had three vets on staff, two of which I liked better than the third. I took my dogs there only if I needed small things done. I had seen first-hand their approach to running a business. Once, a cat had been dropped off; he too had blockage from stones (they call it a “plug” in cats). I asked why someone wasn’t treating the cat right away. One of the vet techs said “We have scheduled clients first!” I was in shock! The cat died later that day.

There were other instances that made me feel uncomfortable there about which I won’t go into detail. If I had a serious problem with my dogs, I drove the 30 miles back to my original vet for their care. One of the things I respected most about my first vet was that when something was beyond his expertise, he was always willing to send me to a Specialty Referral Hospital an hour away. One of my other dogs spent 11 days in an ICU referral hospital, nearly dying from



**Above:** Elizabeth and April at the busy reception area at Pinnacle Peaks Animal Hospital. **Opposite:** Dr. Christine Stevenson with “Winnie,” Kathy Thom’s youngest MS.

a reaction to a combination vaccine booster at six-years-old. There was no ego in the way with my first vet which might interfere with proper diagnosis or health care, unlike where I worked.

Referral hospitals and veterinary teaching schools are a wonderful thing if you have them in your area. They have a full staff of Board-Certified Specialists: Internal Specialist, Surgeon Specialist, Eye Specialist, Dental Specialist, Allergy Specialist, etc. along with state-of-the-art equipment. Many times they double as 24-hour emergency facilities. They usually have the capability of blood-typing and have an in-house blood bank as well.

Several years later we moved half-way across the country to Scottsdale, Arizona. My first priority was to find another vet. We still had the first two older dogs with health problems in addition to a new puppy. There were over 1,600 vet clinics in the Phoenix metropolitan area to choose from. I made an appointment with a clinic I had heard good things about. The staff was courteous and pleased to show me their facility. They touted, "This would be the place to bring my dogs".

Over the next year-and-a-half I soon learned my lesson about choosing a vet "the hard way." My 13-year-old dog had chronic pancreatitis and wasn't treated properly. They persuaded me to run numerous unnecessary tests to find "other causes" for his illness beside the pancreatitis. Needless to say, within a month I had spent several thousand dollars and lost my poor dog in the end. Several months later the vet at that clinic diagnosed my seven-year-old dog with a chronic active liver disease (with very few tests) and put her on chemo-type drugs unnecessarily for six months, nearly killing her. A little voice in my head was telling me something wasn't right, so I took her to an Internal Specialist. Within two hours after a few more tests, he said he didn't think she had the disease at all! We took her off all meds and re-tested two months later. Her blood work was "normal!" Hellooo...! It was then and there that I vowed to never "blindly" follow a veterinarian's advice again without at least getting a second opinion. I also began researching canine health online, specific to Miniature Schnauzers, which is still a passion of mine today.

My next search took me to the veterinarian I've used for the last seven years.....Dr. Christine Stevenson. Ironically, just prior to

interviewing my vet, I had attended a canine nutritional seminar in California and met a woman there that was a vet tech from Scottsdale. She raved about the vet she worked for, coincidentally located at a clinic only five minutes from our home! I made an appointment to interview the vet when I returned. I told her of my concerns and reservations about blindly following any treatments in the future, explaining the multitude of mistakes that were made in the past. She completely understood my concerns and said "*if you can meet me half-way, I'm sure we can work together.*" That was the "key" to the wonderful working relationship we have today!

In my experience, I've learned a number of things that make a good vet. First, I need a vet that actually *listens* to my concerns about my dog. A good vet likes nothing better than clients who are willing to learn how and why certain procedures are done, what tests mean, and who are willing to educate themselves about their pets' health care needs.

A good vet appreciates a client who does health research online and brings it in to discuss as it applies to their dog's health needs. (My first vet in Arizona hated it when I did research or questioned him as ***he was the vet - not me!***) I can't tell you how many times I've done research and brought it to my current vet saying, "Have you read about this procedure or medication?"



**Above:** Dr. Todd Dawson in surgery assisted by Vet Tech Allison. There have been several times, after reading the information and doing some of her own research on the subject, Dr. Stevenson has agreed to try a controversial or new method of treatment as long as we tested along the way to monitor the dog's condition. On those occasions, it was the right choice and my vet wasn't afraid to let me know she had learned something new. In turn, she has done internet research for me on topics I was unable to access.

Dr Todd Dawson, who is Dr. Stevenson's colleague in the clinic, has been very accommodating and helpful over the years. I once teased him about thinking, "Oh no! Here she comes!" He responded, "No, you ask the kinds of questions no one else does; you make me "think!"

My vet has also been very accommodating toward running titers on my dogs versus annual vaccination - even before the new AVMA protocol was in effect. She has been willing to special- order vaccines she didn't normally carry.

A good vet is one that is willing to work *with you* in caring for your dog(s). Four years ago when my dog Kippin was in her last stages of kidney failure just before Christmas, Dr. Stevenson told me to call her at home if need be instead of going to emergency - even on Christmas day. Six months later, when the time finally arrived, I happened to be at the Chiropractor/acupuncture vet with Kippin for her routine appointment. I had also called Dr. Stevenson about Kippin's sudden labored breathing condition earlier that morning. Dr. Stevenson arranged for the Ultrasound Specialist to stop at the chiropractic clinic instead of following his normal routine. When the Ultrasound Specialist diagnosed a massive blood clot in Kippin's heart, I drove her to Dr. Stevenson's clinic where we put her down later that day. I cried, my husband cried, and Dr. Stevenson herself cried as Kippin drifted off to sleep. Kippin had become special to everyone in the clinic over the years.

I can think of countless times when I've had last minute emergencies with my other dogs in recent years. (These included a dog attack, a scorpion bite, and several times when I thought the puppy ate an unsafe toy, when she didn't) Dr. Stevenson's staff have always said "**Come in right now**" even as they were about to close the door at the end of the day. My vet has sent me to specialists when needed and

we've all worked together as a *team* in treating my dogs. I'm *so lucky* to have found such a wonderful, caring veterinarian and staff!



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**Left:** Kathy Thom is author of the first portion of this article and co-author (with her vet) of the portion that follows. Kathy is a member of the Cactus State MS Club; the owner/moderator of the **MS Stones Bulletin Board** online, and is a former moderator of the **Hoflin MS E-Mail List**. She has previously contributed to **The MINI Magazine** regarding her experiences with bladder stones in her first three MS. Kathy is shown with [then] four-month-old Bizbee Uit de Vennen, dam of "Winnie" in the photo with Dr. Stevenson on the first page.

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## **PART 2: How to Choose a QUALITY Veterinarian**

**Dr Stevenson and I have come up with a list of questions (from a consumer's point of view) that you may ask when looking for a veterinarian:**

1. Who do your neighbors and friends recommend?
2. Visit the hospital. Is it an American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA) member?
3. Does the clinic offer convenient hours?
4. Is a veterinarian there during all hours of operation? (Some clinics only have limited hours with a vet on duty.)

[continued]





**Above:** Corinne, a vet tech, performs a routine dental cleaning.

5. Are the staff happy, helpful, accommodating, informative, and proud of their work place?
6. Is the hospital clean and well-equipped?
7. What services do they offer? (Do they have on-site anesthesia, oxygen, and x-ray capabilities? Do they offer sonic dentals? Do they do "in-house" lab work in addition to sending it out overnight for next-day results?
8. Do they have access to "Board-Certified Specialists?" (There are many general vets that advertise state-of-the-art equipment, but aren't certified to use it as a specialist would be. These certified doctors include ultrasound specialists, internal medicine specialists, canine ophthalmologists, allergy and dental specialists, reproduction specialists, chiropractic/acupuncture vets.
9. Are the doctors friendly and informative? (A vet should be able to explain in "layman's terms" your dog's health care needs, post-surgery care, etc.)

10. Does the hospital allow a tour, have a hospital brochure or website detailing the doctors' credentials and hospital history?
11. What are their emergency protocols? Are they associated with a local emergency veterinary facility? Or, do they have an on-call answering service where they can be reached in case of an emergency? (And does that service perform as one expects it to do in an emergency situation?)
12. Does everyone at the clinic express a reasonable interest in you and your pet?
13. Most importantly, do you and your pet feel comfortable with the staff and at the clinic?

**Some of the things a vet should ask a dog-owner to do are:**

Annual Wellness Exams - including: heartworm check, blood profile, stool exam and urinalysis.

**Depending on the area of the country you live in, other tests may be necessary. For example:**

Ehrlichia Canis (a tick-borne disease)

Valley Fever (fungal disease-very prevalent in the Southwest)

Lyme Disease (another tick-borne disease)

A veterinarian should be familiar with the new AVMA vaccine protocol and discuss it with clients as well as offer titer-testing for immunity levels against disease rather than insisting on "the old school" method of vaccinating yearly.

Dr. Stevenson believes that a **quality** veterinarian is someone who is not only a good listener who takes the time to listen to the owner's concerns, but also a good communicator. Both are very helpful qualities.

According to Dr. Stevenson, a good veterinarian is someone who cares not only about the well-being of the pet but also of the family and the relationship that they share with their pets. She says it also

helps to be a skilled diagnostician who is sensitive to the “body language” of the pet and the owner.

She said, “I like to see **vets who think through** cases in a step-wise logical fashion and chooses reasonable diagnostics and treatments in the best interest of the patient.” She added, “These decisions should not be financially based.”

“Certainly from a veterinarian's perspective,” continued Dr. Stevenson, “there are other things that also contribute to being a good veterinarian such as extensive hours of annual continuing education and a passion for this career.”

She noted, “A good veterinarian treats associates and staff members with respect and is generally easy going, easy to talk to, optimistic and cheerful. And behind every good veterinarian is an incredible support staff.”

A good veterinarian should also be in good standing with the local regulatory agencies according to Dr. Stevenson. “I think a good, well-rounded vet is also involved in local associations as well as within the local community.”

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## **RELATED LINKS:**

**Dr. Christine Stevenson, DVM**  
**Pinnacle Peak Animal Hospital**  
**Scottsdale, Arizona**

<http://www.pinnaclepeakanimalhospital.com/>

**AVMA Brochure: “Choosing a Veterinarian”**

[http://www.avma.org/animal\\_health/brochures/default.asp#choosing\\_vet](http://www.avma.org/animal_health/brochures/default.asp#choosing_vet)

**AMERICAN ANIMAL HOSPITAL ASSOCIATION**

**Find an AAHA-accredited veterinary hospital:**

<http://www.healthypet.com/Accreditation/HospitalSearch.aspx>

**“Why Standards Matter”**

<http://www.healthypet.com/Accreditation/WhyStandards.aspx>

**SPECIALTY BOARDS DIRECTORY – list of contacts**

<http://www.peteducation.com/article.cfm?cls=0&cat=1301&articleid=388>