

# The Helsingborg Referral Animal Hospital: A Swedish Foundation Practice

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*Welcome to the Helsingborg Referral Animal Hospital.*

## INTRODUCTION

The Helsingborg Referral Animal Hospital was the first animal hospital to be founded in Sweden. The concept of Veterinary Hospitals being owned by a foundation is interesting and probably unique to Sweden. It is situated in the outskirts of the city of Helsingborg, Skåne county, in the south of Sweden. From the city one has a beautiful view over the waters of Öresund to the Danish coast. The Helsingborg Referral Animal Hospital consists of both small animal and large animal departments. The hospital provides a 24 hour service and receives 30 000 patients each year, of which 23 500 are small animals and 6 500 horses.

The veterinarians at The Referral Animal Hospital are highly motivated. The hospital attracts veterinarians that are interested to work at a high level and want to nourish their academic skills. The hospital motto is **“Veterinary medical leading competence and qualified care – our everyday routine”**.

## The Swedish situation

Sweden has approximately 2100 qualified veterinarians. It is difficult to assess how many of these work exclusively with small animals but there are about 540 members of the Swedish Small Animal Veterinary Association (SSAVA).

Approximately 26% of the Swedish households own a pet. The total number of dogs and cats is in the region of 730,000 and 1,3 million, respectively. Pet insurance is well developed and

about 80% of all dogs and 50% of all cats have healthcare insurance.

There is one university for veterinary studies – the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU). It is situated in Uppsala, an ancient city in the middle of Sweden. Every year approximately one hundred new Swedish veterinarians graduate.

SLU also has a nursing school in the small town of Skara. This educational course is accredited by ACOVENE (accreditation committee for veterinary nurse education). It is a two year course

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and each year 40 nurses graduate. It is still possible to work as a nurse and be trained at a hospital and practice even without the formal education. To function as a nurse or a nurse's assistant (i.e. to be allowed to give injections) there is one basic requirement and that is to attend a specific one day course followed by an exam.

Currently there is a great interest amongst Swedish veterinarians to participate in continued education (CE). There are limited opportunities to attend programmes to become European Diplomates in Sweden. To meet the need for CE in Sweden, there is a Swedish specialist degree level called "Step I".

This is a three year programme which terminate in a written and oral exam. When passed, the Veterinarian can use the title "Swedish specialist in diseases of dogs and cats". Recently an even more specialised CE programme started called the "Step II". This is an organ- or discipline specific specialist degree.

The Swedish Board of Agriculture is the authority controlling veterinary issues in Sweden. They have the responsibility to appoint veterinarians to cover emergencies. There are four appointed 24 hour small animal referral hospitals in Sweden, three in the middle and one in the south of Sweden. They are each run by foundations. In addition to the requirement of 'keeping open', there are certain other requirements regarding the number of Swedish specialists that need to work in these hospitals in order to retain their special status. The appointed referral hospitals are not financially supported by the government to maintain emergency cover. The veterinary school which is supported by the government is also open for 24 hours. Besides this there are a few private hospitals that are also open for 24 hours.

## **'The Foundation of Swedish Animal Healthcare' and it's history**

The Helsingborg Referral Animal Hospital was founded by Dr Fritz Sevelius in 1954. He served as a military veterinarian in the cavalry and realised the need for a hospital in order to properly treat the military horses. Since the government did not consider that it was in the interest of the general public to pay for the running of such an animal hospital, Dr Sevelius persuaded the Household Society of Malmöhus County to finance the hospital. The Household Society represented Swedish farmers and it became the hospital owner. In 1993 the Animal Hospital of Malmö, which was founded in 1958 was also Incorporated by the Household Society. The hospitals are situated in two different cities approximately 70 km apart. In 1999 both of these hospitals were sold by the Household Society and the Helsingborg Referral Hospital and the Animal Hospital of Malmö both became part of a joint-stock company with a 'foundation' as owner. The foundation was formed to prevent the hospital becoming privately owned. It was named **'The Foundation of Swedish Animal Healthcare'**.

The foundation's current board of five directors was chosen by the Household Society. The chairman is supported by two veterinarians, the chairman of the municipal executive committee and a representative from the former owner, the Household Society.

The purpose of the foundation is to promote development,

scientific continuing education and research in general as well as providing specialised animal medicine and healthcare. The function of the Referral Animal Hospital of Helsingborg is to function as a local hospital as well as an important referral animal hospital in the south of Sweden.

Investors in People (IIP) is an International standard to improve the quality of an organisation by development of its workforce. In 2007 the hospital was the first Swedish animal hospital to be IIP certified.

## **Staff**

### **Veterinarians**

Twenty three veterinarians work in the small animal department. Seven of these are Swedish specialists in diseases of dogs and cats. There is one Swedish specialist in surgery, one in ophthalmology and one in internal medicine. One veterinarian is a Dipl.DEVDC (odontology). Only three veterinarians are male which reflects the current trend seen in students undertaking Swedish veterinary education.

A full time working veterinarian (40 hour /week) has in addition an average of 4 night- or weekend day shifts per month. The compensation for daytime duty at weekends is two full days off the following week. Extra salary is paid, in the form of commission on the fee paid, for work done during the night. As Sweden has very generous maternity leave conditions it is possible to stay at home with children for 18 months after the birth. As our veterinarians find participation in hospital activities stimulating, most mums on maternity leave start working 3 - 6 months after delivering their child but on a part time basis, often just a few hours a week. This flexible attitude is appreciated by both the hospital as well as the veterinarians.

### **Nurses**

There are approximately 30 nurses and usually four trainees working in the practice. Seven of the nurses have a degree from the Swedish nursing school.

Each nurse is usually allotted to a particular department. As the work is becoming more specialised the nurses wishing to do so can choose to work in a certain team (for example intensive care unit, exotics, reproduction, dermatology etc). This gives the experienced nurse an opportunity to specialise and to gain more knowledge of, and responsibility for, patients in their care.

The nurses have a rolling schedule that includes evenings and weekends.

### **Receptionists**

The reception is staffed by a total of 8 receptionists with different backgrounds. A few of them are former nurses and a couple are recruited from hotel management.

### **Cleaning**

There are two professional cleaners daily, including weekends.

### **Maintenance and technical assistance**

The hospital is served by two highly efficient staff members that help out with everything technical that is malfunctioning including the computers.





*Dr Larsen assisted by two nurses examines a patient in the nursing ward.*

are three to four nurses who start the day by cleaning the ward, walking the dogs and giving medication. There are two veterinarians in the ward that are on duty between 7 am - 4 pm. These veterinarians are responsible for arranging the common rounds in the morning, in which all veterinarians on duty participate. The rounds start at 8 am and last 20 minutes. After this all veterinarians proceed to their respective departments.

The veterinarians on the ward continue with the daily examination of all patients in the ward and prepare to undertake necessary tasks and arrange discharges.

Feline patients have their own section within the ward. Canine patients are separated according to the type of their complaint. For instance all neurological and orthopaedic patients are separated from the internal medicine cases. Exotics also have a small separate section.

There is a compact but well equipped intensive care unit (ICU) in the centre of the ward. To develop and manage intensive care there is an intensive care team consisting of dedicated veterinarians and nurses.

A separate and isolated part of the ward is used for patients with established or suspected contagious diseases. It is also possible to isolate hyperthyroid cats for treatment with radioactive iodine.

All pet owners with animals in the ward get a daily phone call regarding their pet's condition. When an animal is discharged this usually takes place in the afternoon and each pet owner receives an appointment with the responsible veterinarian. They also receive written instructions regarding the pet's illness as well as an individual treatment plan. All dogs going home from the ward are bathed and groomed.

To support the veterinarians in the ward there is a nurse with the title "ward secretary" who is responsible for checking that client's bills are correct. She also arranges with clients when pets can be collected and calls them if needed to give a report on their pet's progress. When necessary she contacts the referring vets if more information is required. The pet owners also appreciate a phone call from her or the veterinarian a couple of days after discharge. This also enables advice and support to be given if any problems have occurred.



*The morning rounds provide an excellent opportunity to discuss difficult cases.*

### **Surgical department**

All patients are admitted for surgery in the morning. The veterinary surgeon has a brief talk with the owner on admission. The animals are usually prepared for surgery beforehand, having had a pre-operative clinical consultation. At this visit, preoperative blood samples and X-rays can be taken if required. Most types of emergency surgery outside normal hours, including necessary advanced surgery such as neurosurgery can be performed.

Pre arranged surgery takes place between 9 am and 5 pm.

The operating theatre is very well stocked with all the necessary equipment needed to perform advanced orthopaedic procedures, neurosurgery and all fiberoptic examinations (eg. arthro-, laparo- and thora-scopy) currently used by veterinarians. There are usually two to four surgeons working in the operating theatre. A large preparation room is central to the three separate theatres and the room for dental procedures and gastrointestinal endoscopies.

### **Policlinic**

There are three veterinarians with pre booked patient lists and one veterinarian that sees all emergency cases. Each veterinarian is assisted by one nurse. The nurse takes all blood samples and X-rays. In total there are 12 examination rooms. Five of

*The reception with waiting room and shop.*





*A recovering patient taking a plunge in the pool.*



*Physiotherapy to improve balance.*

these have special purposes - one for ultrasound, one specially equipped for emergency cases, one for contagious diseases, one "clean" room for reproduction consulting and blood donors, one for the care nurse on duty at the polyclinic, one room for the exotics, and one room used only for euthanasia with an outer door so the owners can leave whenever they wish without passing through the rest of the hospital. All cadavers are placed in discrete cardboard coffins. The grieving pet owner is offered an individual cremation if required. They then get their pet's ashes in an urn.

On a daily basis there is a "Care Nurse" on duty in the polyclinic who has her own list with pre booked patients. These patients are in for simple treatments such as weight control, suture removal after spays and castrations, second dose vaccinations in puppies and kittens or nail trimming.

There is a care nurse who specialises in behavioral problems who can see patients when required.

The hospital tries to meet the specific needs of feline patients and has a separate waiting room for cats with high shelves for the transportation cages which help to minimise stress. Every other week there is one evening specifically devoted to cats.

### Reception

Reception is open between 7:30 am - 9 pm on weekdays and between 9 am - 3 pm on Saturdays and Sundays. The receptionists are responsible for answering the phone, the booking of appointments, the shop and for all payments including contact with the insurance companies.

In Sweden there are several companies that insure pets (dogs, cats, parrots, rabbits, and guinea pigs). To facilitate matters for the pet owner payment by the insurance company can be arranged by e-mail while the owner is waiting. In this way the owner only pays the part of the bill that is not covered by the insurance. The hospital gets the remainder immediately by electronic transfer from the insurance company. This service is much appreciated by owners.

The shop in the reception area mainly deals with prescription diets. As the Swedish government still retains a monopoly for the sale of prescription drugs, pet owners have to visit an outside pharmacy to have prescriptions dispensed. Out of hours

the veterinarian on call is allowed to dispense initial drugs which are needed urgently.

### Laboratory

The hospital has its own in house laboratory with three biomedical scientists. They serve both the small animal as well as the large animal department. They also receive considerable numbers of external samples from veterinarians all around the southern part of Sweden.

### Physiotherapy

The physiotherapy department was built in 2003 and is equipped with a treadmill as well as a swimming pool with an aqua jet. The physiotherapist, who is certified for human as well as animal treatment, is assisted by two nurses. The patients are given orthopaedic

and neurological rehabilitation, pain relief and muscle stimulation such as massage and stretching.

Physical exercise is encouraged in patients suffering from arthrosis, obesity and post-operatively after orthopaedic and spinal surgery. In addition it is helpful in patients with muscle atrophy secondary to other causes. Owners are able to board their animals at the hospital during periods of intensive rehab/ training.

It is popular for dog owners to rent the pool for an hour of exercise. The police, for instance, appreciate this facility as a part of the weekly training schedule for their service dogs.

### Diagnostic imaging

There are several veterinarians at the hospital interested in diagnostic imaging. The hospital is equipped with digital x-ray, fluoroscopy, ultrasound and an MRI scanner. In the operating theatre there is a separate x-ray and fluoroscopy facility frequently used during surgery. There is also a dental x-ray machine.

### Blood bank

The hospital has its own blood bank with approximately 50 registered canine donors. One day every week dogs come in

*Nurse Erika prepares a patient for an MRI scan of the neurocranium.*



to donate blood. For cats there is a register of cats that can be brought in to donate blood at any time. The blood donors get their vaccinations free of charge and are given yearly blood screening as a token of our appreciation..

## **Education**

Education is something that is emphasised at the hospital. This is one of the reasons why morning rounds are mandatory. Twice a week one hour is set aside for meeting when veterinarians sit down and discuss difficult cases and exchange experiences or give reports from courses they have attended. This is much appreciated and is sometimes attended even by those vets who are off duty. All veterinarians are encouraged to enroll for the Swedish specialist qualification programme. Twice a year there is an afternoon training session in oral presentation skills. Each veterinarian is asked to make a 15 minutes presentation in a topic of their choice. Some of the veterinarians are especially skilled in for instance gastrointestinal diseases and orthopaedics and lecture nationally as well as abroad.

There is a joint agreement to standardise treatment plans for different medical conditions. This is considered important for three reasons. As treatment plans are put together by the most experienced veterinarians, supported by reference to the most recent scientific literature, patients are more likely to receive the "best possible care". Secondly, it makes it easier for a new employee or an inexperienced veterinarian to quickly get in to hospital working routines. Finally, it also makes sure that treatment and charging at the hospital is consistent. It has been particularly noticed that different veterinarians have a tendency to charge differently. A couple of years ago the largest insurance company noticed that generally the less experienced veterinarian performs a more extensive diagnostic work up, and thus the owner is charged more.

There are two study groups created by the veterinarians. One is called the "Ettinger club" where we a chapter is read and then all the vets meet over dinner to discuss it. A corresponding study group for surgery also exists. Both groups are voluntary but they are usually well attended.

In 2006 a two year in house educational programme for all our nurses was started. This was to meet their need for CE and to help further motivate them. It is based on lectures given by the veterinarians as well as different aspects of practical training. It ends with a written examination. The topics covered are wide and include medicine as well as laboratory practice and how to deal with pet owners in distress.

## **Clinical Research**

There are currently preparations to start a research project on a new method for assessing liver function but there is still some administrative work to be done as the requirements from the Swedish Medical Products Agency are extensive.

## **Public relations**

We frequently meet requests from the general public or different kennel clubs to visit the hospital. In conjunction with this, lectures are often given on topics such as emergency care for pet owners, prophylactic measures regarding how to control parasites etc.

The staff regularly participate in different events outside the hospital such as dog and cat shows.

This summer Swedish television followed the daily routines at the hospital in a documentary called "The Animal Hospital". This type of programme is very popular in Sweden and programmes have been recorded before at the hospital as well as at other large hospitals in Sweden. It is of course fabulous PR for any hospital.

## **Referrals**

A fairly large number of clients are referred cases. It is important for the hospital to have a good cooperation with referring colleagues. The clinical director organises most of the referral appointments in order to simplify the process for both parties. As many referred clients have to travel a long way the aim is, if possible, to maximise the benefit of their visit by fitting in all possible necessary examinations. The goal is to try not to perform examinations or analyses that have already been carried out by the referring veterinarians practice. This is also a requirement of the insurance companies. The aim is to send a written report to the referring veterinarian within two weeks. To engender the goodwill of referring veterinarians as well as improve their continuing education the hospital organise "Referral vets meetings". An invitation is extended to all referring veterinarians to visit the hospital to enjoy some good food and a lecture given either by an invited speaker or sometimes by one of the veterinarians at the hospital. This usually takes place at least twice a year and is much appreciated. The hospital has a new lecture hall which can seat 80 people.

## **Future and Vision**

In a few years there are plans to rebuild some parts of the hospital. The policlinic received a facelift two years ago. There are plans to increase the Intensive care unit and a make it more closely connected and accessible to the operating rooms. The isolation unit also needs some modernisation in order to function more efficiently.

The Referral Animal Hospital is a stimulating and dynamic workplace which is pervaded by a tremendous team spirit. Compared to most other countries, Swedish veterinarians generally have more assistance from nurses and nurses are given more responsibilities. At The Referral Animal Hospital for example each department has a nurse who is given major responsibilities. The cooperation between Swedish veterinarians and nurses might appear causal and too informal in some countries. This is however something though that suits both the veterinarians and the nurses at our hospital.

The unique way that the Foundation run the hospital permits investments in education as well as in technical equipment. When working as a veterinarian at The Referral Animal Hospital one is given the opportunity to specialise in an area of interest. This of course improves the level of quality and at the end this must be considered a "win / win" situation for the staff as well as for the patients.