

MEDIA RELEASE

UP veterinary staff and students help pet owners in Bronkhorstspuit

PRETORIA – As part of a vaccination drive against rabies, residents of Bronkhorstspuit (50 km east of Pretoria) and surrounds recently lined up to receive free care and advice for their cats, dogs – and even a parrot. The initiative was organised by animal feed company Alzu Feeds and supported by a clinician, veterinary nursing staff, and veterinary and veterinary nursing students from the University of Pretoria (UP)'s Faculty of Veterinary Science at Onderstepoort.

A representative of the Gauteng Provincial Veterinary Services was also on hand.

The Faculty provided a well-equipped mobile clinic for the day, at which 123 dogs and 21 cats and their owners were seen next to the Alzu Feeds premises in the centre of town. A local animal sanctuary also took the opportunity to bring 25 dogs in their care to the clinic for a quick check-up and the necessary vaccines.

Most of the pets treated received vaccination against rabies and an all-important five-in-one jab against other potentially fatal animal diseases such as canine distemper, canine adenovirus 2, canine parainfluenza, and canine parvovirus.

“The team even helped to clip the feathers and nails of an African grey parrot,” said volunteer Sister Lizette Neethling, a veterinary nurse at the Faculty of Veterinary Science’s Onderstepoort Veterinary Academic Hospital (OVAH). Around 400kg of dog food was given out free of charge, thanks to a donation received from pet food manufacturer Ultra Pet, and global animal health company Zoetis sponsored tick and flea treatments for the furry customers. Vaccines were provided by Gauteng Provincial Veterinary Services.

OVAH veterinarian Dr Makhosonkhe Dlamini was pleased with the condition of the animals he saw. Many were dewormed. An abscess was treated on one dog, while two others were treated for dehydration and constipation.

Dr Dlamini also provided advice to pet owners on anything from what to feed their animals to how to treat some of their pets’ chronic skin conditions. He said many of these cases are linked to the persistent presence of ticks and fleas in their surroundings. “I am glad the drive also provided valuable hands-on training to the UP students who volunteered. I was very proud of the way they handled the animals brought in, and how they provided a helping hand where needed.”

Sister Melanie McLean, a veterinary nurse in OVAH’s Section of Diagnostic Imaging, agrees: “The event was a great way to provide our younger students with practical experience. I loved watching how our students chatted with pet owners and helped where they could.”

The initiative was started by Sonya de Bruyn, depot manager of Alzu Feeds in Bronkhorstspuit. She is a former veterinary technologist and an alumnus of the University of Pretoria who in 2018 graduated with a master’s degree in animal production. This meant she understands the importance of quality care for one’s animals and

pets, but also that many people simply can't afford their pets' necessary shots and other treatments such as deworming pills and tick and flea treatments.

"Getting regular rabies shots for their animals counts among the many things that people let slip during the COVID-19 pandemic," De Bruyn said. "It can be an expense, but free ones are available through the state veterinarian. The logistics of getting it can however often be daunting to smallholder farmers and pet owners alike."

Her initial plan with the pop-up campaign was only to provide pet owners and smallholder farmers easier access to the free rabies shots available through the state vet. Things started to snowball – but all in a good way, to the benefit of Bronkhorstspuit's people and animals – after she sent an email to some of her contacts in the UP Faculty of Veterinary Science, to ask for volunteers who could help.

De Bruyn was grateful for the support provided by UP students and staff and hopes that their visit to Bronkhorstspuit will be the first of many.

"With rabies being such a frightening disease, the Faculty of Veterinary Science fully supports initiatives aimed at preventing its spread," said Dr Paul Van Dam, Director of the OVAH and another champion of the initiative. "Dogs are the source of 99% of human rabies infections – which are all fatal. Rabies can however be 100% prevented by vaccinating cats and dogs. It is also our duty to inform and educate communities about the possible risks if pets are not vaccinated against the disease."

Dr Van Dam said the prevention of rabies starts with animal owners, who should ensure that all their dogs and cats are vaccinated annually. A recent outbreak of rabies among dogs in the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal has led to a handful of fatalities among people, while the first cases in decades among dogs in Cape Town were also seen.

Captions: Animals being treated in Bronkhorstspuit

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About the University of Pretoria

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa, with its administration offices located on the Hatfield Campus, Pretoria. This 114-year-old institution is also the largest producer of research in South Africa.

Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS). It is the only University in the country with a Faculty of Veterinary Science, which is ranked top in Africa. UP has 120 academic departments and 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 55 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes.

UP is one of the top five universities in South Africa, according to the 2019-2020 rankings by the Center for World University Rankings. The QS World University Rankings also placed UP among the top 100 universities worldwide in three fields of study (veterinary science, theology and law), and UP is in the top 1% in eight fields of study (agricultural sciences, clinical medicine, engineering, environment/ecology, immunology, microbiology, plant and animal sciences and social sciences), according to the Web of Science Essential Indicators.

In May 2020, the annual UK Financial Times Executive Education Rankings again ranked GIBS as the top South African and African business school. The University also has an extensive community engagement programme

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