

Viviana FaBrizio SUMMARIES **Facebook and Personal Blog**

Of public interest and concern is the treatment and care of our pets by veterinarians and their staff whom we freely, but with certain vulnerability entrust the well-being and longevity of our pets. Our pets pervade our everyday lives. So when they become sick, we strive to give them the very best in medical care and we search for caretakers who are aligned in our belief that our pets are our family.

The mission statement seen on the website for Southern California Veterinary Specialty Hospital attracts members of the community because they claim to understand the “close bonds that people form with their pets” and reassures individuals that “your pet is an important member of your family, and we treat each patient as if they are part of ours.” Based on their philosophy, I believed my dog Amore would be welcomed into their family and appropriately cared for. As my story will reveal, I was wrong.

I had a precious, fun-loving Bichon Frise named Amore. Throughout her life, I made sure she received the best in veterinary care. At the time, I thought Southern California Veterinary Specialty Hospital was the best in veterinary care. I trusted that the promises they made on their website, in their flyers and pamphlets around the facility, and even those made by the veterinarians and staff were completely true.

My story begins with a specific referral to Dr. Stegeman from another doctor in the same hospital who had previously done surgery on Amore. In that way, I thought Amore would be in careful and considerate hands. In February, 2010, Dr. Stegeman diagnosed Amore with Cushing’s disease. According to Dr. Stegeman, with appropriate treatment, Amore would not only get better, but would live longer. She promised that during this healing process, she would be 100% available to me via phone, in-person, and even offered to be available during the weekends in case of emergencies. But in the alternative, Dr. Stegeman also promised that even if she was not physically present at the hospital during the weekends or after-hours, the on-duty staff during these times would get a hold of her on the phone in case of any emergency with Amore. To further ease my doubts, Dr. Stegeman assured me that the on-duty weekend and after-hours staff was just as good and qualified as the daily daytime staff. With these assurances, I felt at ease and confident that Amore was in good hands.

Dr. Stegeman’s initial treatment of Amore was startling. She started Amore on 30 milligrams of Trilostane and I was very happy that after one week of this daily dosage, Amore was swimming and playing. However, Dr. Stegeman thought it was necessary to increase Amore’s Trilostane medication to 40 milligrams. Feeling I could trust Dr. Stegeman’s words, I succinctly followed her directions for Amore’s care. According to Dr. Stegeman, I had a major responsibility to monitor Amore’s reaction to the newly-increased medication to make sure that Amore showed no adverse signs. I was surprised by this increase, but Dr. Stegeman assured me that although Amore was doing better, she was not rapidly healing and the increased dosage would help facilitate more desired results.

I trusted Dr. Stegeman. I diligently followed her new instructions and continued Amore on the increased pill medication for the next four days. But, that Sunday at nearly 3:30 a.m., Amore woke me up with frantic panting and was restlessly circling the room as though she wanted to vomit. She in fact finally did vomit and was able to sleep despite her feverish state, but I knew this was an emergency situation. Actually, Southern California Veterinary Specialty Hospital changes its name to Irvine Regional Animal Emergency Hospital every night even though it is the same facility. I believed they did so as a way of assuring the public that during these times where anything can happen to your pet, emergency care would be readily available. At the time of Amore's emergency, I believed it was appropriate to bring Amore in since the hospital represented itself as turning into a special emergency hospital. I also remembered Dr. Stegeman's words that she would be available to us to remedy any problems so at about 8 a.m., I took Amore to the emergency clinic.

When we arrived, I had to wait nearly 20 minutes before seeing the on-duty emergency doctor, who I later found out was not a licensed veterinarian at all, but a mere intern, representing herself as a licensed vet. In fact, neither the staff nor Ms. Chan informed me that she was not a licensed vet, but merely a student! Further, the staff and Ms. Chan acted as though she was actually licensed and had the authority to treat Amore!

As can be expected from someone who is a mere student, Ms. Chan had no idea what to do with Amore. Desperate to find a solution, I consistently asked her to check Amore's cortisol levels in order to determine whether Amore's increased Trilostane medication had anything to do with her present sickness. However, Ms. Chan insisted that Amore's condition was not due to the increased Trilostane, but with an abnormal pancreas. In fact, her tests confirmed Amore showed signs of an abnormal pancreas, but I was startled by this news since Amore had been tested several times for the past six months! Despite my apparent reluctance, Ms. Chan administered an antibiotic shot and anti-vomiting pills and shots. I thought this was a drastic move and begged for her to first consult Dr. Stegeman. Although I was adamant that Ms. Chan's diagnosis was completely incorrect, she ignored my suggestion and proceeded with her decision. My later research revealed that the correct way to treat an overdose of Trilostane is by administering activated charcoal for cleansing the digestive system and inducing vomiting—the exact opposite of what Ms. Chan had prescribed! However, Ms. Chan revealed to me that all the medical care administered to Amore thus far had been approved by Dr. Stegeman. I was still not satisfied and when I asked Ms. Chan to make sure Amore's condition was not due to the increased medication by performing an ultrasound, to my surprise, Ms. Chan stated that she did not know how to operate the ultrasound machine. Again, I pleaded with her to call Dr. Stegeman, but she refused stating that Dr. Stegeman had “a life” and of course, could not come in during her time off.

According to Ms. Chan, the only recourse available would be to make an appointment for Amore to see Dr. Stegeman the next day. Again, Ms. Chan attempted to reassure me with another direct approval from Dr. Stegeman's: according to Dr. Stegeman, Amore “looked good enough to go home.” However, even making a simple appointment was an obstacle.

The receptionist informed me that there were no available appointments for Dr. Stegeman, but I could leave Amore at the hospital and if time permitted, Dr. Stegeman would see Amore in between her other patients. When I asked whether anything would be done for Amore if I left her at the hospital overnight, the receptionist replied in the negative and merely repeated that Dr. Stegeman would squeeze some time tomorrow for Amore. I begged her to call Dr. Stegeman and to my amazement, the receptionist stated that she actually just talked with Dr. Stegeman and that Dr. Stegeman approved of all Ms. Chan's decisions, including authorization to release Amore from the hospital and to bring her back the next morning. I demanded to see Ms. Chan who also informed me that she too had just talked with Dr. Stegeman and that Dr. Stegeman fully approved of all Ms. Chan's medical decisions. I was shocked to hear that while I was on my way out of the hospital, both the receptionist and Ms. Chan were able to speak with Dr. Stegeman and I was not despite my numerous pleas.

Ms. Chan assured me that if there were any more problems with Amore, to give her a call immediately. Although Ms. Chan released Amore from her care, I refused to leave Amore at the hospital knowing that she would be alone in a cage and in pain with no relief. I took Amore home to do whatever else I could to alleviate her suffering. That afternoon, I took Amore outside and noticed she was bleeding from her rectum. I immediately called my husband outside to help Amore, while I phoned the hospital. I was put on hold for nearly 10 minutes even though I told the receptionist that Amore was bleeding! When the receptionist finally came back on the line, she said that there was only one doctor available who was currently attending to other patients, but that if I would like, I could leave a message for Ms. Chan to call back. I just hung up the phone. When I ran back outside, I saw Amore's body convulsing and blood profusely flowing from her nose, eyes, and mouth. During the 10 minutes I was put on hold, Amore died.

Since that incident, we received a letter from Dr. Stegeman revealing the poor practices of the hospital. In an attempt to feign accountability, Dr. Stegeman stated that she works nearly 12 to 18 hours each day and does need some days off. But, I have to query, if that is the case, then why lead me to trust she would still be at our assistance? Further, she also revealed that it is not the policy and practice of the hospital to have on-call veterinarians during weekend hours for emergency purposes, "Emergency services are available on the weekends, but typically specialist services are not." Rather, emergency assistance is left to mere unlicensed interns! Why would the emergency on-duty staff hide the fact that those caring for our pets are students rather than licensed and apt veterinarians? Further, why would the emergency on-duty staff even go so far as to appear and act as though these students had the knowledge and authority to diagnose our pets?

To add insult to injury, Dr. Stegeman and the staff at Southern California Veterinary Specialty Hospital have strongly implied blame on my part for refusing to leave Amore at the hospital despite the suggestions of Ms. Chan, Dr. Stegeman, and the receptionist. However, I am offended that they would shift blame on me when my actions were fueled by love and the best interest of Amore. Amore would have been left alone without any

treatment overnight and would continue to suffer with pain while waiting until the next morning until Dr. Stegeman's schedule opened up to squeeze some time to see her. In fact, because I was filled with fear for Amore, I asked Ms. Chan if Amore looked like she was going to die, but Ms. Chan repeated that Amore was good enough to go home. It never crossed my mind that my gut feelings would be confirmed and that in such a short time, Amore would die despite Ms. Chan's assurances. Thus, my actions are blameless. Amore had to rely on me and not the supposed specialists who abandoned her.

Ms. Chan never called me back to check up on Amore. What truly shows the lack of accountability in this facility is seen in Dr. Stegeman's lack of knowledge about her patients. She called me the next morning exclaiming that Amore must be much better because we missed her morning appointment. She had no idea that Amore had died and when that fact finally became apparent to her, she never again mentioned the possibility of Amore's death due to a negative reaction to Amore's medication. My family and I have not only had to withstand Dr. Stegeman's blame on us for Amore's untimely death, but we have yet to be given an explanation as to how and why Amore died. No dog's life should end the way Amore's did. She was a member of our family and we trusted that Amore was a cared patient of Southern California Veterinary Specialty Hospital. However, these doctors turned their backs away from their critically ill patient and left her to the untrained hands of mere student interns.

This is not a facility that believes in treating pets as family members. It is a facility lacking accountability, dishonesty, and opaqueness. This is why my story is important. Would you trust a graduate of medical school to treat your ill daughter or son? No. Then how could you trust a mere intern to care for your ill pet?

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For many of us, our pets are part of the family.

What if I told you I found such a place and experienced a world of trouble?

Heed my story and beware...

In nearly 24-hours, Amore died due to Dr. Stegeman's absence, interns not specialists, and a callous staff.

If we do not trust a medical school graduate to treat our son/daughter, why would we allow an unlicensed vet to treat our family pet?