

Viviana FaBrizio SUMMARIES
media release

Of public interest and concern is the treatment and care of our pets by veterinarians and their staff whom we 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. But, what if I told you that I found a hospital whose mission statement explicitly provided that “Your pet is an important member of your family, and we treat each patient as if they are part of ours”? And, what if I told you that my family pet, Amore died because of this hospital’s broken promises, lack of accountability, and transparency? This is the bleak truth I had to face. I want to share my story with you so that the public now armed with the truth, will motivate Southern California Veterinary Specialty Hospital to change its poor policies. Further, if there are other veterinary hospitals following the same suit, they will be wiser knowing that the public will not accept anything less than the best care for their family pets.

My fun-loving Bichon Frise, Amore was diagnosed with Cushing’s Disease and I sought the care of Southern California Veterinary Specialty Hospital. Our personal veterinarian, Dr. Stegeman assured me that during this healing process, she would be completely available to us via phone if not in person. 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. 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. But, only four days after her odd and questionable decision to increase the dosage of Amore’s medication, Amore began uncontrollably panting, was feverish, and finally vomited. Finding this to be an emergency situation, I hurried to the hospital’s ER clinic where Dr. Chan, the on-duty emergency clinic veterinarian, was assigned to Amore. However, as I later found out, “Dr. Chan” was not a licensed vet at all, but a mere intern, representing herself as a vet. In fact, neither the staff nor Ms. Chan informed me that she was not a licensed vet and they even acted as though she was.

I tried to tell Ms. Chan that perhaps Amore’s condition was due to the increase in medication, but she would not listen. I even suggested an ultrasound, but Ms. Chan strangely refused, stating that she did not know how to administer the procedure. Against my apparent concerns, Ms. Chan gave Amore anti-vomiting pills and shots, followed by an antibiotic shot along with numerous other tests. I begged her to contact Dr. Stegeman, but she rejected these cries stating that Dr. Stegeman had “a life” and it was her day off. 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! After Ms. Chan’s treatment of Amore, she revealed to me that over the phone, she gained Dr. Stegeman’s

approval for all of Ms. Chan's decisions regarding Amore's medical care. Further, Dr. Stegeman instructed Ms. Chan to allow Amore to go home with me because Amore "looked good enough to go home." In the alternative, Ms. Chan suggested I could leave Amore at the hospital to await Dr. Stegeman's arrival the next day.

Ms. Chan reassured me that if there were any other problems with Amore, to immediately call her back, but I still felt I had no other option except to make an appointment with Dr. Stegeman the next day. However, I met another obstacle. The receptionist informed me that all appointments were booked for Dr. Stegeman and that Amore would just have to be seen in between patients. I explained to the receptionist that Amore's condition needed immediate attention, and to my surprise, she admitted that she had just spoken to 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 was floored by this information considering I had audibly pleaded with Ms. Chan to allow me to speak with Dr. Stegeman. Knowing the truth, I demanded to speak with Ms. Chan again, but she too admitted that she had just spoken to Dr. Stegeman. Apparently, Dr. Stegeman approved all of Ms. Chan's decisions and all I could do was leave Amore unattended and untreated until the next morning.

I refused to leave Amore suffering alone at the hospital and took her home to do whatever else I could to make her comfortable. Later that afternoon, when I took her outside for a walk, I noticed bleeding from her rectum. I yelled for my husband to come out and take care of her 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. Frustrated, I hung up. When I ran back outside, Amore was convulsing in my husband's arms and profusely bleeding from her eyes, nose, and mouth. During the 10 minutes I was put on hold, Amore died.

In a 24-hour emergency situation, Amore died. 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.

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.

The poor practices of Southern California Veterinary Specialty Hospital present an issue of public interest and concern: they do not disclose to owners that interns, unlicensed to practice, run the emergency care clinic without supervision from licensed specialists. Customers of this hospital are paying for 24-hour emergency help, which means that when your family pet's health is jeopardized day or night, a licensed vet should be on-duty. The life of your pet should not be left to a mere intern whose only obligation is to phone the actual vet and apprise him/her of the situation. I ask all other veterinary facilities like this one to make good on their promises so that future loss and heartbreak can be avoided.