A Day in the Life of a Veterinary Technician

A fluffy black-and-white cat greets patients and visitors at the Chippens Hill Veterinary Hospital in Bristol, Conn. The cat lives at the hospital, as do two other cats, a pair of cockatiels, a milk snake, a bearded dragon (a type of lizard), and a three-and-a-half-foot-long, 7-pound green iguana.

Chippens Hill is a warm, welcoming place for animals to live, to be cared for, to heal, and, yes, sometimes to die.

In the hospital's examination room, Danielle Pratt is reassuring a nervous patient whose anxiety is causing long strings of drool to fall from her mouth. Pratt, 32, is a veterinary technician at Chippens Hill. The patient, Clara, is a big cuddly-looking long-haired white cat who is too overweight—and reportedly too lazy—to clean herself properly. She is in the animal hospital today to have her matted fur shaved and to get her yearly rabies shot. She is not happy about this prospect, so Pratt speaks to her in reassuring tones.

Clara will be sedated throughout the procedure—both for her safety and for Pratt's safety. Shaving an angry, anxious cat is a nearly impossible task. Clara continues to drool in dreaded anticipation.

A voice from the next room calls out, "Danielle! Your patient is upside down and drowning!" Pratt investigates and finds that Turtle, a small tortoise in her care, is upside down in his container. Pratt rights him and explains that Turtle arrived at the hospital full of parasites and not eating. "He still won't eat on his own," she says. "Turtles can take a while to get better. We're trying to give him a chance." For now, she feeds Turtle through a feeding tube.

The animal hospital is busy, and Pratt will be working hard all day long. This day's appointment schedule includes neutering a young cat, examining a boa constrictor that's not eating, and trimming a chinchilla's teeth. Pratt will assist with the surgical procedures and perform several procedures herself, including drawing blood from each patient. "The only time you're sitting is at lunch," she says. "This is not a lazy person's job."

For now, though, Pratt's attention is on Clara, who is meowing in protest as she is poured out of her carrier and placed on the examination table. Before carrying her to the scale, Pratt wraps the cat in a towel, one of the many self-protective measures a vet tech must take every day. So far, Pratt has
been lucky and hasn't been injured by an animal. "I've been scratched beyond belief," she says. "I've never been bitten. But I will be."

In addition to safety concerns, there's a lot of physical labor involved in lifting, transporting, and holding the animals, some of which might be scared and liable to lash out. The physical aspect of a vet tech's job has its benefits, though. "I've built up some serious muscles," Pratt notes.

**Cat Wrangling**

Once Clara is back on the exam table, Pratt holds her down while veterinarian Nicola Melliar-Smith checks the cat's ears and listens to her heart. Pratt presses Clara's nose gently to stop her nervous purring. "You can't hear the heartbeat when they purr," Pratt explains.

Melliar-Smith must administer preanesthesia to Clara to calm her down before she is sedated completely. The doctor is having a hard time finding a vein through all of the fluffy white fur, and the cat is losing patience fast. Finally the doctor finds a vein in a leg and gives Clara a shot. Meanwhile, Pratt speaks to Clara in soothing tones. "Don't get mad now," Pratt says. "The hard part is over."

"Eow," Clara grumbles.

Cat wrangling didn't come naturally to Pratt, whose only pet growing up was a hamster. In fact, Pratt is allergic to dogs and cats and takes allergy shots in order to work. She learned to approach, handle, and interact with animals from the doctors and other techs and through daily experience. "In some cases, you just have to be quicker than [the animals] are."

The staff received a crash course in owl care when someone brought in an injured screech owl found by the road. People often bring in sick or injured wildlife—the staff has treated chipmunks, frogs, hawks, rats, and a blue heron, among others. The little screech owl had a broken wing that needed to be amputated. Under the staff's care, the owl, which they named George, healed and now enjoys a new life as an educational owl at a nearby nature center.

Although on-the-job training is a big part of becoming a skilled vet tech, formal training is required. Pratt has a four-year degree in veterinary technology; it's also possible to earn a two-year degree in the field. The curriculum combines science and medical technology coursework with clinical experience.
Everyday Responsibilities

Clara is put back in her cage to mellow out. Pratt collects a stool sample from the cat to check for parasites.

Vet techs must be attentive to detail. Each drug used is carefully logged so that every staff member knows what medication each animal has received and doesn't mistakenly administer a second dose or something that might interact badly with a medication already given.

After a drug is administered, a vet tech monitors the animal closely. For example, exotic animals need special attention while under sedation. Pratt remembers a sedated parrot that stopped breathing. She and the veterinarian worked to restore the bird's breathing, and after a few tense moments, the parrot pulled through.

Success as a vet tech depends on quick thinking and the ability to cope with a variety of tough situations—a panicked and nipping dog; a carrier full of stray kittens left on the hospital doorstep; an operation to remove a small tumor revealing that an animal's body is riddled with cancer. When that happens, Pratt says, "We usually don't let them wake up."

Pratt admits there are tearful moments for the staff when an animal dies. But death is part of the job. "A lot of the animals that we put to sleep need to be," she says. "You have to look at it that way. You're doing them a favor."

Today, though, no tears are shed, only fur. Clara is prepared to be sedated and then shaved. Shaving—for hygiene, not for beauty—is one more skill Pratt picked up on the job.

As Melliar-Smith hooks Clara up to a machine that will deliver the sedative, Pratt monitors the cat's vital signs. Clara slowly begins to fall asleep. Pratt rubs a bit of goo on Clara's sleepy eyes that will keep them lubricated while she is under anesthesia. When Clara stirs, Pratt adjusts her sedative levels. Finally, Clara is asleep and ready to be shorn and bathed and to receive her rabies shot.

Pratt performs all of these tasks with great care and skill. She then carries the sleeping cat back to her cage, gently places her on a soft towel, and positions a heat lamp nearby. Clara will wake up slowly and comfortably.
For a vet tech, every day is different and filled with its own interesting challenges. "Animals can't tell you what's wrong," Pratt notes. "It's exciting to figure it out."

Want to Be a Vet Tech?

If a workplace filled with a mix of animals that need care and attention sounds as much fun as a barrel of monkeys, consider a career as a veterinary technician. While the majority of vet techs work in animal hospitals, some find work in research laboratories, zoos, stables, and animal shelters. According to the National Association of Veterinary Technicians in America (NAVTA), the main duties that a vet tech performs include the following:

- conducting physical EXAMINATIONS and taking the patient's history
- TEACHING pet owners to care for their pets
- CARING for the hospitalized animal
- administering MEDICATION and vaccines
- performing CLINICAL LABORATORY PROCEDURES, such as taking blood or stool samples or checking an animal's blood pressure and oxygen level during surgery
- DENTAL cleaning and examination
- taking and reading an animal's X-RAYS
- managing an animal's SEDATIVE and monitoring the animal while it is under sedation
- assisting in SURGERY
- conducting BIOMEDICAL RESEARCH (Note: a four-year degree is preferred in the research field.)

To find an accredited veterinary technology training program, visit www.navta.net/vettechprograms.htm.
1. How is Danielle able to work at a veterinary hospital if she is allergic to cats and dogs?
   A. She takes daily allergy pills.
   B. She only works with reptiles and birds.
   C. She wears gloves and a mask.
   D. She takes allergy shots.

2. Which of the following sequences correctly describes steps that Danielle completed in caring for the cat, Clara?
   A. sedate, shave, bathe, give rabies shot
   B. shave, sedate, give rabies shot, bathe
   C. bathe, shave, sedate, give rabies shot
   D. give rabies shot, shave, bathe, sedate

3. Which word would the author most likely use to describe Danielle Pratt?
   A. lazy
   B. careful
   C. insensitive
   D. nervous

4. Read the following sentences and answer the question: “As Melliar-Smith hooks Clara up to a machine that will deliver the sedative, Pratt monitors the cat’s vital signs. Clara slowly begins to fall asleep.”

   In this sentence, what does the word *sedative* mean?
   A. a container used to house a sleeping animal
   B. a test used to check an animal’s vital signs
   C. a bandage used to ease an animal’s pain
   D. a drug used to make an animal sleep

5. The primary purpose of this passage is to describe
   A. the experience of an injured animal
   B. the work of a veterinary technician
   C. the death of a patient
   D. the requirements to be a veterinarian
6. How did Pratt learn to be a veterinary technician?

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7. The first paragraph lists some animals that live at the hospital. Why might animals live at the hospital?
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8. The question below is an incomplete sentence. Choose the word that best completes the sentence.

Pratt performs tasks with great care _________ her patients’ lives may depend on it.

A  so  
B  because 
C  although 
D  but

9. Answer the questions based on the sentence below.

The staff at the veterinary hospital cared for the owl because the owl had a broken wing.

Who?  the staff

(did) What? ____________________________________________

Where? ____________________________________________

Why? ____________________________________________
10. Read the vocabulary word and definition below and complete questions 10a, 10b, and 11.

**Vocabulary Word:** prospect (pro · spect): something that will happen in the future.

10a. Read the five sentences below and underline the word **prospect** in each sentence.

1. The brothers were excited about the prospect of going to the toy store tomorrow.

2. The prospect of losing the race made the runner very sad, so he decided to run faster.

3. The prospect of failing the test next week pushed the student to study even harder.

4. The customer bought the lottery ticket, thinking about the prospect of winning a million dollars, which would allow him to buy a house.

5. Becoming a veterinarian was one career prospect that the student thought of for her future.

10b. Which image shows a prospect that that you can look forward to if you win the lottery?

![Image](image1.jpg)  

11. How can a student help his or her prospects of succeeding in school?

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