



Independent Veterinary Practices Find a Voice with IVPA



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There's a concerning trend in veterinary medicine—and it could greatly alter the choice that pet owners have to care for their furry companions. Across the country, an increasing number of veterinary practices are going corporate, joining large networks of national practices like VCA Animal Hospitals and Banfield Pet Hospitals. As they grow, these national chains change the way that once-independent veterinarians do business. At the same time, Dr. Bonnie Bragdon and the [Independent Veterinary Practitioner Association](http://independentwestand.org) (IVPA) work to remind consumers that they have an important choice when it comes to veterinary care.

Today, approximately 30,000 veterinary practices exist in the United States. Surprisingly, [at least 10 percent](#) of general practices, and 40 to 50 percent of specialty practices, are owned by corporations. Perhaps even more surprisingly, two of the largest veterinary medicine networks, VCA and Banfield, are both owned by Mars, Inc.—yes, the chocolate company.

“Corporatization is happening really rapidly, and so we expect an increase in the number of corporate-owned practices,” says Dr. Bragdon.

Bragdon witnessed this trend—and its effects—firsthand. After practicing for 10 years and owning her own veterinary hospital, Bragdon says, she left practice to pursue a career in industry. Her new role required her to travel around to different veterinary clinics and meet with different veterinary professionals.

“I started to feel firsthand the increased corporatization of veterinary medicine,” she says. “I would go into a clinic that was owned locally, and then the next time I visited it had been purchased by a national practice.”

During this time, Bragdon observed two fundamental differences between independently owned practices and national practices. These differences weren't about the quality of care, but rather the way that each practice delivers care.

“The veterinarians who work at corporate practices as opposed to local practices are equally qualified,” Bragdon says. “The difference between a corporate-owned and an independently owned practice is the concept of a formula for how patients are cared for.”

While independent practices can customize their care, costs and recommendations to each family, national practices are more restricted in the ability to customize their approaches. Importantly, Bragdon says, national practices have to conform to national standards of care set by the corporate headquarters.

“These standards of care make it harder for a veterinarian working in a corporate practice to deliver care customized to your specific pet, your family’s financial needs, your family’s moral and ethical beliefs and the geography you live in,” Bragdon says. “A corporate practice might say that the best practice is for all dogs to be vaccinated against Lyme disease because that’s the national standard for all practices located throughout the United States. However, Lyme disease is not equally common across the entire United States.”

These national standards help corporate practices remain efficient and generate a return on investment, but they also alter the relationship between veterinarians and their patients. For local practices, Bragdon says, that relationship is the number one priority.

“With locally-owned veterinarians, their primary goal is to develop a relationship with the animal owner or pet owner to deliver the care that they need,” she explains. “First and foremost, it’s about the relationship. With corporate practices, the driver is to ensure that the practice is operating efficiently from a financial standpoint. It’s just a different way of thinking about generating revenue.”

Additionally, Bragdon observed the important role that local practices play in their communities. “I noticed when I traveled around to many small practices, some of them located in rural areas, that these practices were a really important part of the community,” she says. “They create jobs in communities that otherwise didn’t really offer much opportunity for residents to have a professional career.”

Drawing on her observations, Bragdon and three other veterinarians formed IVPA in 2017. IVPA represents more than 350 independently owned veterinary practices in the United States, helping them promote their practices as locally owned and encouraging consumers to find a local vet in their area.

“Our goals were twofold: One, we wanted to make sure that independent practices had a voice and representation within the profession as corporatization grew,” Bragdon explains. “And on the other side, we didn’t see any organization that was promoting the unique attributes of independent practices to consumers. So second, we wanted to be the organization that helped consumers understand that they have a choice.”

Now, independently owned practices can [join IVPA](#) to receive marketing materials and promotional support, as well as industry-facing advocacy. Meanwhile, consumers can visit www.vetlocal.us, a site created by IVPA to educate the public about industry consolidation and assist them with finding an independently owned veterinary practice in their community.

For more information about IVPA, visit www.iveterinarians.org.