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Mission of Mercy

FSM Animals receive medical

By Sarah Garvey

In most places, the medical examination of pigs, cats and dogs is no big deal. But veterinarians are so scarce in most of the Western Pacific that medical care for agricultural livestock and domestic animals is rarely available. That's why the February visit of a team of volunteer veterinarians to Kosrae and Pohnpei was so exciting for the people of these two islands.

The U.S. veterinarians were part an organization called Remote Area Medical Volunteer Corps, or RAM. Dr. Jennifer Scarlett, medical director of the Berkeley East Bay Humane Society in Berkeley, California, led the team of four veterinarians and one pig consultant. The team spent a week in Kosrae and a week in Pohnpei, and all of their services were provided free of charge.

"If you improve the lives of animals, you will improve the lives of people," says Dr. Scarlett, who is board certified as a specialist in large animal medicine, "If pigs and chickens are more healthy, then people will have more protein."

Chris Tamalavage and her husband, Lam Dang, the economic adviser to the Pohnpei state government, led the effort to bring the RAM team to the Federated States of Micronesia. They had read about a similar RAM mission on Guam and began the process with a letter to RAM, followed by telephone calls and email exchanges.

Remote Area Medical is a non-religious charitable organization that provides medical care to people and their animals in the United States and remote parts of the world.

The veterinary arm of RAM began in 1995 with a spay/neuter program on the Rosebud Indian Reservation in South Dakota. Since that time, it has provided care to approximately 22,000 animals in the United States and other countries such as the Dominican Republic, Guatemala and Mexico.

While in Pohnpei, the RAM team set up makeshift examination and operating rooms in the state agriculture building in Kolonia. Here, accompanied by Johnny Cash and Macy Gray tunes playing on their CD player, the young vets treated more than 100 dogs and cats—giving vaccinations, evaluating sprains, injuries and performing spaying and neutering services. A separate team of vets, along with a pig consultant from South Carolina, donned knee-high rubber boots and trekked through the Pohnpei rainforest to local farms where they examined and inoculated pigs.

Though it was the first of its kind, the clinic was well received in Pohnpei. So many people wanted appointments for their dogs and cats that a waiting list had to be created. Over 90 pig inspections were requested, from a cross-section of the Pohnpei community. Both the governor of Pohnpei and the Nahnmwarki (traditional leader) of Kitti requested that their pigs be examined, as did a small shopkeeper living a mile away from any kind of road. He told the clinic organizers that he wanted to arrange for his entire village to have their pigs seen.

While the RAM team visit was a volunteer mission, the board of the Pohnpei Soil & Water Conservation District presented the group with a check for \$1,000 (about one-fourth of the district's annual budget). "We have problems and we don't have experts in all cases," says Jackson Phillip, the former agency chairman. "In our custom, when you volunteer you do something very important."

Although a few Pohnpeians raise pigs to sell for cash, most keep pigs because of cultural necessity. At feasts, and particularly at funeral feasts and annual feasts for the Nahnmwarki, Pohnpeians make offerings of pigs, as well as yams and sakau plants.

On the pig inspections, RAM vets addressed medical problems afflicting these important animals ranging from hernias to systemic infections to malnutrition of nursing sows. The vets also used their time in the field to pass on helpful information to local swine caretakers and College of Micronesia Extension Agents.

RAM was in Palau this May. There is talk of future RAM missions to Yap, the Marshall Islands and a return trip to Guam.

—Sarah Garvey is a freelance writer based in California.

For more information on the Remote Area Volunteer Medical Corps, check their Web site at: www.ramusa.org or email them at: ram@usit.net. Or you can phone them in the U.S. at 1-865-579-1530.