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SA Career Focus is aimed at all those in need of career advice and guidance, from Grade 9 learners, to those making a mid-life career change! Read on to find out what that job is really like, expected salary, where to study and so much more!

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Veterinary Surgeon

We all know how important dental health is these days, or so we are reminded by our mothers, and keeping our pearly whites healthy and clean is made possible by a daily brushing and flossing routine and regular visits to our dentists.

In the animal world, healthy oral hygiene is critical for survival, both domestically and in the wild. Without healthy teeth and facial structures, it becomes nearly impossible for animals to chew food and for predators to bring down prey. Domestic animals are also dependant on healthy and well-kept teeth and jaw structures and although Fifi doesn't have to hunt down her next meal, she does need them to munch down her serving of beefy pellets.

The work

Dr Gerhard Steenkamp, Dental and Maxillofacial Surgery Clinic head at the Department of Companion Animal Clinical Studies of the Faculty of Veterinary Science at Onderstepoort, knows all too well the importance of good oral hygiene when it comes to domestic pets as well as larger wild animals. The doctor explains that he's a qualified veterinarian with a particular interest in dentistry and maxillofacial surgery. "I work as a veterinary surgeon, but concentrate specifically on animals with dental or maxillofacial problems. These are mainly animals with cleft palates, jaw fractures or tumours in the jaws. I deal with all the animal species which include dogs, cats, rodents, horses, and even wildlife," explains Gerhard.

He stumbled across this field of veterinary science in his final year of study, when he was exposed to a dentistry case during his rotation through the surgery section. "This fascinated me as I like doing things with my hands and I felt that this could be

drive to the zoo or a very long flight if it's out of the country," adds Gerhard.

Learning the ropes

Qualifying as a veterinarian is the first step to becoming a veterinary surgeon such as Dr Steenkamp. After gaining his BVSc degree, he pursued another four years of training through an international institution as well as doing in-house training with specialists overseas. "Being a surgeon means you should have good creative hands that can overcome various challenges you might find during surgery. You should be innovative and understand the regional anatomy very well," he explains.

The good, the bad and the interesting

Gerhard enjoys that fact that he can go to bed at night knowing that he has done his best to make a difference in the lives of both his patients and their owners. "I believe that this is why God gave me the talents that he did," smiles Gerhard.

On the downside, dealing with clients who cannot afford surgical procedures for their animals, makes for many a sad situation. "It's just a fact of life that all of us do not have the financial means to have all that we want. However, I find it very distressing not being able to help patients because of a lack of finances," he says ruefully.

Let's face it – the animal world can be as comical as it is scary and Gerhard has encountered his fair share of sticky and funny situations. "A client once walked in with a pet fruit bat hanging from her shoulder that needed a dental scale and polish," smiles Gerhard. "Also while performing dental work on a hippopotamus bull, it woke up, stood up, and opened his mouth very wide," he

Quick Facts

Salary

Varies

Qualifications

BSc (Veterinary Biology) as prerequisite for BVSc

Working hours

08:00 - 16:30

Places of Employment

Private practices or academia

Subject guidelines

English or Afrikaans

Mathematics

Physical Sciences

Contact your university for more specific information.

Interesting websites

Department of Companion Animal Clinical Studies

<http://web.up.ac.za/default.asp?ipkCategoryID=148>

American Veterinary Dental College

www.avdc.org

Vetdent SA

www.vetdentsa.co.za

Places To Study

University of Pretoria

012 420 3111

BSc (Veterinary Biology) as prerequisite for BVSc

an area of veterinary science that I could excel in," concludes. says Gerhard.

A day in the life

A working day for Dr Steenkamp is rarely an average one, which as he mentions is something that he prefers. His day starts off at around 08:00 with consultations, which continue till around 11:00 after which he starts his procedures booked for that day. "Some of the cases can be done in the clinic. For the more advanced cases I need to be in the theatre. Depending on the cases, I may have to perform special procedures like radiography or CT scans on the patients before I can start the procedures which will also be done in this time period after 11:00. A normal working day will continue until approximately 16:30," explains the doctor. "For the majority of wildlife work I need to travel to where the patient is, which may be a short

On the side ...

- **My favourite animal is...** an elephant.
- **The most interesting animal I've worked on is...** it would be unfair to pick one, but some of them are: koala, tapir, babirusa, hippopotamus and bottle-nosed dolphin.
- **Cats and dogs don't get along because...** They live in different worlds. If you ask them I'm sure they will confirm that dogs live in a world where they strive to make their owners happy and would love nothing more than pleasing them. Cats on the other hand see owners as a necessary evil in their lives and will now-and-then give the owners some affection to keep them happy.

By Justin Augustine

Published By: Marli Merz & Matters

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