



A MISSION TO SERVE

One Veterinarian's Adventure in Mongolia

By Barbara Breckenfeld

It is summer 2000. A veterinarian prepares to teach his pupils how to perform surgery in the field. First, they gather the needed instruments and supplies. Then, it's time to sterilize the tray of instruments.

“What are we going to use to sterilize these instruments?” he asks his associate.

OB pulls out a half a bottle of vodka and hands it to the doctor. After some searching, OB finds some Nolvasan and adds it to the vodka.

Another day, after observing his pupils perform a successful spay surgery at a clinic in the countryside, they celebrate with Mongolian tea (a handful of black tea boiled with one part milk, rock salt and two parts water) accompanied by cooked sheep's innards. As the favored guest, the doctor was offered first pick of the intestines and other organs. As a subsistence culture practicing animal husbandry, the Mongolians live mostly on meat, milk, bread, and cheese. They derive the vitamins they need by eating organs and other innards. Nothing is wasted at butchering time.

Dr. Jeff Duke's journey to Mongolia actually began over a year before. Dean of the Veterinary School at the Mongolian State University of Agriculture in Ulaanbaatar, Dr. Orgil Doloonjin made a three-month trip to the West Coast of the U.S. In the summer of 1999, he worked and visited with veterinarians from California to Washington. He stayed with the Duke family and worked at the Pilchuck Veterinary Clinic in Snohomish where Jeff Duke is the lead small animal doctor.

Dr. Orgil, as he is known, is an accomplished surgeon, earning his Ph.D. on caesarian section in camels. For all his training, he had had very limited exposure to laboratory work. Besides his interest in Pilchuck's lab, he observed treatments in the large animal area. His main focus was the small animal department because he was returning to Mongolia to start a small animal clinic.

Although Mongolia is best known for its horses and nomadic herding people, seventy years of Soviet influence encouraged migration into cities and towns. Besides the native Mongolian herding dogs, with the Russians came companion animals and the need for small animal veterinary care.

After two weeks in Washington State, Dr. Orgil invited his new friend to visit him in Mongolia. At first, Jeff Duke wondered what he had to contribute as a small animal veterinarian in a country known for its horses and animal husbandry. After reading an article describing the consequences of severe drought in Mongolia followed by a harsh winter that cost the country 20% of its livestock, Dr. Duke's question became a heartfelt desire to help in any way he could.

Christian Veterinary Mission (CVM) sponsored Dr. Orgil's and Dr. Duke's trips. This organization of veterinarians has dedicated itself to meeting the physical and spiritual needs of people whose survival depends on livestock. Although CVM supported and organized Dr. Orgil's trip, it acted as an umbrella organization for Dr.

Duke. He procured his own funding for the trip. Besides his own resources, he received support from the congregation at the Central Christian Church in Snohomish where he is a member. CVM handled the logistics of his visit, while Dr. Gerald Mitchum, a veterinarian on long term mission there, set up his contacts and itinerary.

Veterinary practice in Mongolia combines scientific training and outdated practices. For example, the vets still bleed horses, a practice common in the 19th Century. Dr. Duke observes, "Mongolian veterinarians were like sponges for information. They don't lack ability or initiative, just resources." He intends to help fill the gap.

There is such a lack of vaccines and medications that no resistance to antibiotics has developed. Many diseases considered exotic or rare in this country are common in Mongolia including anthrax, foot and mouth disease, rabies, brucellosis, and bubonic plague.

After decades of socialized medicine under communism, today's challenge for Mongolian vets is demonstrating the value in their services so that herd owners decide to invest in having healthier animals. The primary health issues for Mongolian livestock are nutrition and parasites.

After two years at the School of Agriculture followed by three years at the College of Veterinary Medicine, Mongolian veterinarians receive no hands on clinical practice. Although many come from herding families in the countryside, some students have so little exposure to animals that they are afraid of dogs.

It is now summer 2001 and Jeff Duke is preparing to make his second trip to Mongolia in September. Another year of harsh weather has treated Mongolia badly. He anticipates seeing the lab equipment and supplies he helped acquire being put to use. He is also looking forward to teaching his eager and willing pupils more skills that will enable them to improve their lives through improving the health of the animals they depend on.

The main focus of this year's trip is the grand opening of a new clinic in Ulaanbaatar. Sponsored by Vetnet, an organization of Mongolian vets organized by CVM, the private practice clinic is designed to provide hands on clinical experience for Mongolian veterinary students. At first it will host visiting western vets who are assisting the Mongolians, but as the Mongolian vets get trained, it will become their clinic.

It is summer 2000. Dr. Duke is observing his pupils learning to perform a spay. First, OB does it with Byabot's assistance. Everything came out okay, although there were a few problems. The next day, Byabot did the spay with OB assisting. Everything went very smoothly.

Byabot, who is also mayor of his town, said, "It is possible." Meaning that for the first time he could see the value in this surgery and how he could offer it to the people in his town. It was moments like this that inspire Jeff Duke to return to Mongolia. Knowing how such a small contribution can make such a huge impact.