



# Hannah Stephenson

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## ***How long have you been a vet?***

*I graduated as a vet in 2005, from the University of Glasgow. I started working in the local area, at Oakhill Vets in Preston, before going down the route of specialization.*

## ***How did you become involved in specializing in the heart and why?***

*I was always fascinated by the heart while studying for my degree, as I think it is the most amazing organ - it's so important for life and so complex in its function. I knew quite quickly that I didn't want to be a 'GP' so firstly I did a year's rotating internship at the Royal Veterinary College. While there I became more convinced that cardiology was for me, so I then did a year of cardiology research at the University of Liverpool before starting a 3 year residency training position. This training is similar to the training that consultants in human medicine undertake.*

## ***Where do you offer your services?***

*I currently offer a mobile consultancy service for practices and pets across the North West of England. This is unique in that pets do not have to travel to another practice to see a specialist, as I come to the pet's usual practice to see them.*

## ***What are the most common heart conditions you see in pets?***

*Most of my patients are dogs and cats. In dogs, the most common heart disease is 'mitral valve disease'. This is caused by degenerative changes to the valves in, particularly, the left side of the heart, which can cause heart enlargement and heart failure. In cats, by far the most common heart disease is a condition called 'hypertrophic cardiomyopathy' which causes thickening of the heart muscle walls. Again, this can ultimately progress to heart failure.*

## ***Are all heart murmurs/conditions something to worry about?***

*Some dogs and cats can have heart murmurs that are known as 'innocent' murmurs, which are nothing to worry about. Some animals can have a murmur without having very advanced heart disease, but they can also have severe heart disease without having a heart murmur at all! It's nearly impossible to tell for certain just by listening to a pet's heart whether they have significant heart disease, and therefore usually further investigations are needed to determine if this is something to worry about.*

## ***Do all heart conditions need treatment?***

*No, not all heart conditions require treatment. Often, heart disease in animals has a long asymptomatic period (i.e. when they show no symptoms) and in many conditions no treatment is required at that time. However, we do also have drugs for some conditions that we know will slow the progression of certain diseases, even if the pet is showing no clinical signs. In some cases, there might also be a surgical treatment available.*

## ***What sort of questions do you ask owners when they have been referred to you?***

*Most of my questions relate to whether the owner thinks that their pet is showing any signs of heart disease. It can be really difficult to spot signs in animals, and also animals are very good at pretending they are absolutely fine, even with severe heart disease! Sadly, a lot of my role involves end-of-life care of patients in heart failure, so I also like to make sure that I know exactly how my clients feel about the balance between quality and quantity of life in their pet - every client and pet is different.*

## ***What sort of clinical signs should owners be concerned about?***

*As I have mentioned, many pets with heart disease show no clinical signs of their disease at all. Clinical signs of heart disease can include difficulty exercising, fainting, difficulty breathing and coughing among other things. If there's something not right with your pet, just have a chat with your vet to determine if it needs more investigation.*

## ***What can owners do to help their pet if they are diagnosed with a terminal heart condition?***

*Unfortunately, there is little proven, other than the current medications currently used by vets, to make a difference to the long term outcome of our pets. Probably the best thing for owners to do is to monitor their pet closely, try and give medications as regularly as their pet will allow, and to ensure they maintain a good quality of life for as long as they can.*

