

The Fish Doctor Makes Pond Calls

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Panky Glamsch

Smack in the middle of the door was a sign reading:

"Be kind to animals—kiss a shark."

It was there and we saw it.

We also saw the sign to the left of the door advising everybody in general that in this office was located a fish doctor.

Obviously, this was a mind-expanding door straight out of "Alice in Wonderland."

After all, whoever heard of a fish doctor?

Not many people, the friendly bearded man inside assured us.

Nor are there many, said Dr. Charles Dale Meryman, who have heard of a fish ambulance that carries a full medication supply, surgical equipment, air and water for the fish.

"We have a four-wheel drive Blazer for an ambulance so that we can make house calls," the doctor said. "Pond calls sounds so common, doesn't it?" he laughed.

But, as a matter of fact, that is exactly what the fish doctor makes: Calls to ponds, lakes, retailers or wholesalers who have sick fish. And, along with hobbyists, they, in turn, bring their sick fish to him.

Meryman also does surgery and autopsies on fish, bacteriology testing, pollutant bio assays (to detect heavy metals such as mercury), fish identification, 25 water quality tests in both fresh and salt water, and lake and pond analysis (vegetation, fish studies, water quality and lower food chain identification).

The other part of his work is research and consulting such as recommending fish population and stocking controls.

Meryman feels that fish disease and water quality diagnosis are important whether you have small hobby tanks or raise fish commercially. Since veterinarians are not trained to diagnose, treat and operate on fish, he thinks there is a definite need for fish specialists.

How, you may ask, do you operate on a tiny tropical fish? Very carefully, of course.

A liquid local anesthetic is dropped in the fish's tank of water until the fish is heavily tranquilized. The fish doctor then takes out the fish and places it on a wet piece of cotton under a dissecting microscope.

"Most operations are from two to five minutes and that is about the limit a fish can stay out of the water." Dr. Meryman said.

"A heavily-tranquilized fish will stay out longer because the breathing and heart rate is reduced. Since his metabolism is slowed down, his oxygen requirement is very low and he can stay out of the water longer."

The most common operation he performs is an autopsy. However, some cosmetic surgery, removal of tumors and amputations are also

done.

Often, it is necessary to do blood tests on fish to determine if a disease is of bacterial or viral origin.

Sometimes the fish doctor does this by heart puncture. After inserting a needle in the fish's heart, he withdraws the blood.

Other times, a fish might have to be sacrificed in order to save the rest of the fish in a given area. Then, Dr. Meryman first will over-tranquilize the fish, then cut off its tail and get blood from the main tail artery.

Meryman, who works on everything from guppies to sharks, is quick to note that his doctor's degree is not in medicine. The Illinois-born man received an associate degree in zoology from Kaskaskia College, then bachelor, masters and specialist degrees in fish pathology from Eastern Illinois University. He also has a pharmacist's certificate from the state of Illinois.

"We like to be classified as a pathbiologist or fish parasitologist, one who diagnoses and studies fish diseases and recommends measures for their control," he said.

From the time he was a young tadpole, if you'll pardon the expression, Meryman has had an interest in fish.

"Since I was nine or 10 years old, I kept or bred fish," he recalled. "From that time on, my goal was to be in fisheries' research. I never changed my major."

Although Meryman first set up his fish disease and research center in Charleston, Ill., he decided to move to Brandon because, he said, about 80 per cent of all tropical fish in the United States come out of this area. And, timewise, he would be able to give immediate results on fish testing.

The move was made New Year's Eve. Shortly after reaching Florida, Meryman was to see one of the state's worst freezes in history move in and wipe out possibly 75 per cent of the tropical fish here.

To add insult to injury, on his trip South, a breakdown in frigid Kentucky caused the death of his private collection of fish worth about \$600.

Undaunted, he began setting up practice and, Meryman says, "The doctor is in and he is working."

Since Meryman lived in Bradenton in 1971 and '72 getting practical experience working with fish farms and fish sales, he said he felt like he was coming home when he returned to Florida.

He also says he has attained one of his goals: To open a completely equipped office where almost any fish-related research can be done.

His office, just off S.R. 60 at Bay Plaza, has nearly 1,200 square feet of space, a laboratory aide, two full time pharmacists as consultants and a professional photographer.

The center includes a reception area and office; examination, or environmental room where aquariums will be kept; surgery and autopsy room; bacteriology and serology room; storage room; preserved fish area; and a medication preparation room.

It is in the last room that Meryman's own line of 17 different brands of medication is available for treatment of everything from bacterial to protozoan diseases.

“We have a medicated food that will be coming out on the market soon,” Meryman said. “It is for internal worms in fish and currently there is no treatment for that.

His title, The Fish Doctor, and the logo that is his trademark are protected; he writes disease columns for international journals; writes a monthly column for North American Native Fish Association and was just elected to that group’s board of directors; does some editing for the fish health section of the American Fishery Society magazine; and has been identifying some of the parasites on the false killer whales and spinner dolphins that beached at Fort Lauderdale last fall.

Meryman taught vertebrate national history, fish pathology and aquarium management at Eastern Illinois University and is a shell collector and certified diver with the National Association of Underwater Instructors.

And he really is a fish doctor.

His sign is there—and we saw it.