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# Wentworth Courier

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# Pet project

Vet Sam Kovac is saving animal lives with human treatment

Picture: John Appleyard

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# Medical miracles

Trailblazing vet Sam Kovac is using groundbreaking human treatments to save pets' lives, as Mercedes Maguire reports

**D**ean Kilby's little Bedlington terrier Teddy was on his last legs. A congenital kidney defect had left him vomiting and lethargic and he had, at best, just weeks to live.

Until they met veterinary surgeon Sam Kovac.

With no traditional recourse left to save Teddy, the Bellevue Hill vet suggested groundbreaking stem cell therapy may be his only chance and, with nothing left to lose, Kilby accepted.

In partnership with a respected surgeon Kovac had been working with to bring human treatments to animals, they harvested fat cells from Teddy, grew them in a lab and reinjected them back into Teddy hours later.

Within a month Teddy's kidneys were greatly improved and within two months they were back to their normal levels and he went on to live a happy, healthy and full life.

That was six years ago and the procedure was the first time Kovac had ever used stem cell therapy on an animal. Since then, the 32-year-old vet, who owns Southern Cross Vet at Bellevue Hill, St Peters and Surry Hills, is leading the charge in Australia to treat animals using human treatments in human facilities where there is no veterinary alternative.

He has treated pets dying of cancer with groundbreaking radiotherapy treatment previously only used on humans. He routinely uses single-port laparoscopy surgery to

desex pets, a much less invasive procedure which he says requires next to no healing time. He uses stem cell therapy to treat animals suffering debilitating arthritis, which is the number one killer in dogs over 12 due to them being euthanased. And he takes pets to human facilities to have advanced imaging procedures like CT scans, bone density scans and MRIs.

"Our pets deserve this, we share our lives with them. Why don't our pets, who give us unconditional love, deserve the same access to quality healthcare that we get?" Kovac says.

"I never understood what the hesitation is for vets to work with human doctors. I'm a big proponent of this concept of 'one health' where, if doctors and veterinarians can work together, we can really improve the lives of pets and people and we can share our expertise for everyone's gain rather than working only in our own areas."

Kovac acknowledges that these procedures are not for everyone – the cost alone can be a deterrent to many pet owners. A five-course treatment of radiotherapy for a dog with cancer, for instance, can cost about \$15,000. But he also agrees it's not his place to make that decision for a pet owner, but merely to provide the option.

He is passionate about his work, about being able to save pets from the euthanasia needle he says is so often unnecessarily prescribed.

**Right: Vet Sam Kovac at home with his Pembroke Welsh corgis Maddie, Clara-belle and Bonnie. Picture: John Appleyard**

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who give us  
unconditional love,  
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healthcare that we get?

Kovac has partnered with world-leading professionals in human medicine to provide these treatments to pets.

“I’m not some dumb vet doing this Frankenstein garbage,” he says.

In the area of regenerative therapy involving peptide and stem cell procedures, he has worked closely with a local doctor he met at a human medicine conference who has published hundreds of papers on stem cell therapy here and overseas.

They are working on publishing a study together that will include about 150 successful cases in animals.

“If you were to ask me what I think the immediate future in veterinary and human medicine is, the answer would be 100 per cent regenerative medicine, so combining stem cell therapy with peptide therapy,” Kovac says.

“Arthritis is probably the number one ailment for this. If a dog in Australia is lucky to live long enough, is lucky enough to have cheated cancer and all the other horrible things they can get, they are going to get arthritis. And over the age of 12, it’s the biggest killer of dogs because of euthanasia. Would you put down your grandma if she had arthritis?”

Another area Kovac finds exciting is oncology for pets. It is estimated about one in four dogs will get cancer in their lifetime, a rate that increases to almost 50 per cent in dogs over 10 years. The cancer rate is lower in cats, affecting about one in five.

Kovac says the treatment is similar in animals and humans. But with one human year equivalent to about seven pet years, the rate that cancer progresses in a pet is much quicker, so early detection is important.

This is where advanced imaging comes in. Kovac has developed relationships with human facilities that offer CT scans and MRIs to



**Vet Sam Kovac examines Dasha the Russian Blue cat at his Bellevue Hill clinic. Picture: John Appleyard**

get imaging done for his pet patients.

He recalls the case of Murphy the beagle, who came in with a lump on his back leg, which was benign, but to better plan the surgery, he suggested a CT scan, which revealed a thyroid tumour. They were able to organise through a human facility an injectable radiation therapy that destroyed the entire thyroid gland and saved the dog’s life.

So often, a diagnosis of cancer in a pet is a sure death sentence, but Kovac has been safely putting animals into remission through radiotherapy treatment, previously only used for humans, for six years.

He says some vet clinics offer a

crude form of radiation for pets that often results in side effects like burning of the skin, blindness and irreversible epilepsy.

Partnering with human facilities in the eastern suburbs, Kovac has taken radiotherapy treatment in pets one step further by offering them stereotactic ablative radiotherapy (SABR), a cutting-edge treatment which delivers highly focused doses of radiation to a small area.

“When we did the Southern Hemisphere’s first SABR technique on an animal three years ago, I teamed up with a really amazing radiation oncologist for humans who does this day in and day out for human patients, including paediatrics,” Kovac says.



**I forwarded him the history and CT scans of the dachshund ... whose owners were told euthanasia was the only option. The doctor said ‘yep, we can totally help this patient.’**

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"I forwarded him the history and CT scans of the dachshund who had a really aggressive nasal tumour and whose owners were told euthanasia was the only option. The doctor said 'yep, we can totally help this patient.'

"The dog had five treatments. After that the tumour was virtually liquefied on the nose and it went on to live a full and wholesome, happy life.

"The owners were so grateful they sent fruit boxes and wine deliveries.



**I have always loved animals. My house has always been referred to as the Vaucluse farm and Dad used to joke he'd get kids in the street to pay admission so he could afford to pay all the vet bills**

"The doctor had never, ever worked with a vet before and we both found it very intellectually stimulating to compare the expertise and what's going on in different species. He said it was amazing to see how similar, almost identical and translational, his area of medicine was to animals."

One of the most common procedures performed in any vet clinic is spaying, or desexing in female pets. Traditionally, it is done through a large incision down the animal's midline to get access to the abdomen and often the uterus

is removed as well as the ovaries – in effect, a full hysterectomy that takes an animal about a week to recover from.

In comparison, single-port laparoscopy is performed through a small incision under 10mm and only the ovaries are removed. Kovac says the pet is fine to go and play in the park after the procedure.

And he believes his is the only clinic in NSW offering this single-port procedure for desexing pets.

Often pioneering in any industry attracts critics, and Kovac has had his fair share of detractors. But the passionate vet dismisses the critics, reaffirming his dedication to the care and welfare of his pet patients and their owners.

Kovac, who still lives in the Vaucluse home he was born in, has wanted to be a vet for longer than he can remember – literally.

"Ever since I was three I wanted to be a vet," he says. "I don't even have a memory of back then, but my parents and brothers tell me about a time when I was riding on this little green Fisher-Price tractor on our front terrace and apparently one of my mum's friends said: 'Oh Sam, are you going to be a farmer when you grow up?' And I turned to her and said: 'No! I'm going to be a vet!'"

"I don't remember that, obviously, but I have always loved animals.

"My house in Vaucluse has always been referred to as the Vaucluse farm and Dad used to joke he'd get kids in the street to pay admission so he could afford to pay all the vet bills for the animals in our house.

"I'm happy to keep doing what I'm doing, my clients appreciate it and the pets are benefiting from all the things we are doing at our little patch here in Bellevue Hill.

"It would be good to inspire other vets that would be interested in regenerative medicine, advanced imaging and advanced oncology and at least give the options to families."



**Proud animal lover Sam Kovac's car has a distinctive figurehead and plates. Picture: John Appleyard**

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