

Celebrating Dr. Neil Harpster



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The ACVIM Specialty Lifetime Achievement Award recognizes prominent veterinary leaders who have made significant contributions in each of the six ACVIM specialties. Neil K. Harpster, VMD, DACVIM (Cardiology), former director of the Cardiology service at Angell Animal Medical Center in Boston, received the Specialty Lifetime Achievement Award for cardiology in June 2024.

The MSPCA-Angell has undoubtedly had its share of veterinarians who have become legends in the field of veterinary medicine. University professors, researchers, cutting-edge clinicians, lecturers, prolific authors, and innovators in new techniques in medicine and surgery have all been a part of the 110-year history of the hospital. Some of these veterinarians have served as Angell staff doctors, and others were interns and residents who graduated and went on to other institutions and hospitals. Having been at Angell for 40 years, I know that many of these doctors have shaped me into a better veterinarian. However, one of the most influential veterinarians, for me, and to the veterinary community in general, is Dr. Neil Harpster.



For those of us lucky enough to work with Neil, I could stop right here, and all the memories would come back. But a little history is in order for those who never had the privilege of knowing him.

Neil worked at the MSPCA-Angell for over 40 years. After graduating from the University of Pennsylvania in 1965, he interned at MSPCA Rowley Memorial in Springfield, MA. Afterwards, he joined the staff at Angell Boston and was the heart of the hospital for the next 40 years. He was “a true veterinarian’s veterinarian.” He came to Angell in the days before specialty colleges and was gifted in all aspects of being a veterinarian. He was one who could help with any medical case. He did his own surgeries (from PDAs to splenectomies), saw referrals, emergencies, and had a huge, extremely loyal clientele.

However, with all his expertise, Neil’s true passion was cardiology. In the early days of his career, he was a cardiologist before there were echocardiograms. He would diagnose specific heart disease with an ECG, radiographs, and a physical exam. I remember one of my overnight shifts with a dog who I was worried about having pericardial effusion. Of course, Neil was still at the hospital, and an hour later, we performed a pneumopericardiogram, removed the pericardial fluid, and diagnosed a right atrial mass.

Ask any Angell intern over Neil's tenure, and they will have had experiences like this. He was always there for the interns. He was the clinician who could always be counted on when you needed him, even if it was at midnight. He helped countless interns survive another day.

When the ER list got busy, he would even take the emergency cases himself. And not just cardiology issues — he would take whatever was next, whatever the problem.

Neil trained nearly 400 interns and started the cardiology residency program. All nine of the cardiology residents he trained became boarded.

But no story about Neil would be complete without a mention of his handwriting. There were three people in the hospital who could actually read his medical records, so if he was not in the hospital, these people were really needed; otherwise, we had problems. His extremely loyal clients could only look at us blankly, trying to figure out what medication their pet was taking!

Starting in 2021, ACVIM began awarding a lifetime achievement award. This past year, Dr. Neil Harpster was awarded the lifetime achievement award in cardiology. Neil was recognized as one of the pioneers in veterinary cardiology and one of the first to pursue specialization when specialty medicine was in its infancy. He was additionally noted for his legendary dedication to his clients, animals, and colleagues. To all of us who know him, the award comes as no surprise. No one is more deserving.

Unfortunately, Neil could not make the formal presentation at the ACVIM last June, but a few of us, including most of the cardiologists he trained, met Neil for lunch, and we did our own presentations. People came from all over the country and even Canada to share in the event. It was great spending time with him again, telling stories and hearing him laugh. For those of us there, it was a day we will always cherish.

Thank you, Neil, for your expertise, teaching, compassion, and dedication to all of us you trained, all the clients you served, and all the animals you helped. You made a big difference in the lives of so many and helped shape veterinary medicine for the future. You are one of a kind and will always be in our hearts!



First row, left to right: Bill Turel , Rebecca Malakoff, Doug Brum, Neil Harpster, Brad Moses, Paul Gambardella; Second row, left to right: Nancy Laste, Lisa Moses, Michael Pavletic, Etienne Cote, Tim Cain, Eileen Neary, Michael Bernstein