

Trends: Russian Vets and Pets Go Commercial

By Julie Poucher
The Moscow Tribune

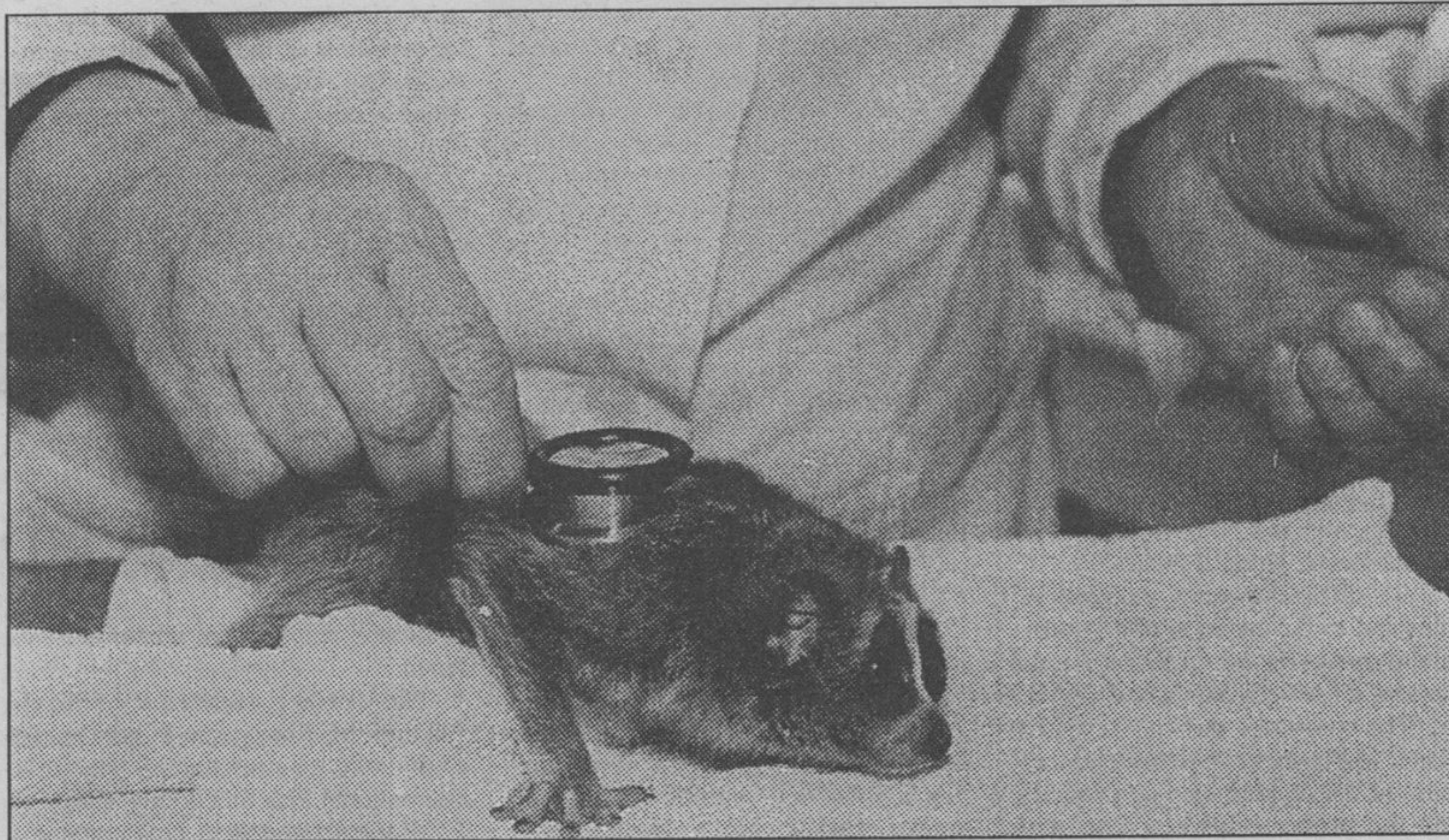


Photo by Vladimir Suvorov/The Moscow Tribune

Even zoo vets are in demand by Moscow's pet lovers, who own not only dogs and cats, but even more exotic pets such as lemurs and crocodiles. Here, a little lemur gets a checkup.

all use imported equipment and provide foreign medicines, food and pet paraphernalia, at prices competitive with government pet supply stores and a little higher than state clinics.

Bureaucratic headaches, as private veterinarian Ludmilla Koleva explained to *The Moscow Tribune*, deter vets from legal registration of their firms and private practices. The Russian legal system is confusing at best and taxes are steep, she says. "Even legal registration has its loopholes."

Consequently, whether they own a mutt or a champion, Moscow's pet lovers now have the option to pay for private health care and imported pre-prepared food. The options are attractive, in a city where regional clinics

have degenerated to the lowest levels of filth and disease and prices on everyday staples have risen 2 1/2 times, says Koleva.

To complicate matters, now that state funding is so low, even the 25 vet clinics in Moscow — where three years ago pet owners could at least depend on free vaccines — today charge for everything. Prices are comparatively low at the municipal clinics, but enticing only to those that can afford no better.

"I don't recommend the regional vet clinics at all," said Antokhina. "I don't invite anyone to come into these unsanitary, filthy places. I've been to Germany and seen their clinics and hospitals and I'm convinced the Russian state clinics are the worst in

the world."

Antokhina said that everyone she knew either had their own private vets or went to some of the newly-opened private clinics.

House-call vets advertise primarily by word of mouth, and secondarily in local newspapers or animal lover directories.

The prices for house-call vets are based on "agreements" between the vet and the clients, says veteran vet Koleva, who has just combined her private practice with her own pharmacy/pet food store — a feat she claims to have accomplished with "no money, a healthy dose of professional competency... and some contacts."

Koleva is a single mother who quit her low-paying job at a municipal vet clinic so she could pay for her 18-year-old son's English and German language education.

Her business, on a side street near Baumanskaya metro, shares space with an optical firm. On her first day of business, this February, some of the optika crowd turned up their noses at the Finnish- and German-bought dog chow she stocks, and asked her when

she would be getting Pedigree Pal and Whiskas.

While once Russia's pet owners were content to feed their pets oatmeal and carrots, nowadays they are buying more and more into claims of complete nutrition made on the labels of pre-prepared food, says Koleva. She claims, however, that the most popular pet foods are bad for the stomach.

Now that Koleva is a businessperson, she must think about advertising, competitive pricing, tax inspectors and long hours. And she's not planning to give up house calls, either, which she says can take up to five hours when time spent commuting by public transport is taken into account. Her firm, "Centre Express" employs four vets on retainer, and keeps a reference list of animal surgeons for customers needing advanced help. The logistics of kick-backs from the other vets and specialists who she will recommend to store clients are yet to be worked out. She says she can't monitor how much her vets will charge. The rates on medicine, food and consultations will change according to inflation.

Director of the half-state owned/half-private Vet Service clinic, Sergei Bulgayev, says his three-year-old business pays all the necessary taxes, and he buys only imported equipment. Bulgayev gets his vaccines from a French firm, he said, because European mutations of the viruses that pets have to be vaccinated against are closer to the Russian mutations of the diseases. Local vets claim that French vaccine is the best for Russian dogs and cats. The Russian vaccines used by municipal clinics are completely unreliable, he said. Vet Service has 14 doctors on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Checkups cost 5,000 roubles and vaccines range from 20,000-25,000 roubles.

The French-Russian joint venture pharmacy, SANA, claims to do "a very good business" in supplying puppy vaccines for \$11 each for private firms around town.

Further listings of breeders, dog groomers, veterinarians, clinics and hospitals can be found in the Animal Lover's directory at the VDNKh Veterinary pavilion, which also has a hefty international stock of medications, vaccines, pet food, leashes, flea collars and other pet paraphernalia.



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