Another night in the animal ER

By Judy Stanford
Staff Writer

It's 10 o'clock at night and your cat is howling in pain. It seems serious, but you're not sure what to do. Should you call your vet out at this hour?

Or maybe it's 3 o'clock on a Sunday afternoon, and your dog has been hit by a car. Your vet is out of town, and the answering service is having trouble finding the vet on call.

Precious seconds are passing. Your pet is like a member of the family. Maybe you hadn't realized until now how much it means to you or how far you would go to save it. But what can you do?

If you were dealing with a human being, you'd already be on your way to the emergency room. But you can't do that with a pet, can you? Or can you?

The answer for pet lovers in the Acadiana area is yes.

That's what Rene Hulin did. When she came home from work at one night at 9 p.m., her 18-year-old Lhasa apso, Tutu, was obviously in a great deal of pain.

The stomach was as big as a fist," Hulin recalled. "I called my doctor's office. By this time, it was 10:30 at night. I didn't know the animal emergency clinic existed."

Her call was automatically forwarded to the Lafayette Animal Emergency Clinic.

When she arrived there, things went fast.

"I just walked in, and the lady at the desk started getting information from me. The doctor walked out immediately."

The Lafayette Animal Emergency Clinic is open from 5 p.m. to 8 a.m. and on weekends - the exact opposite of a conventional veterinary clinic.

"The clinic exists for animals in distress," said Dr. Lon Randall, general manager of the clinic. Randall is on duty at the clinic five nights a week.

On weekends, area veterinarians take turns filling in, so there is a vet on duty at all times during hours of operation.

Tutu was lucky. The vet diagnosed a ruptured hernia and recommended emergency surgery, but cautioned Hulin that surgery would be risky because of the dog's age.

"She was dying," Hulin said. "And I've had her for 18 years." She decided to take the chance.

By 1:30 a.m., the clinic called Hulin at home.

"I wanted to let me know she was all right," Hulin said. "And he told me I'd have to bring her to my regular vet in the morning."

June Theriot, left, and Rudy return to the emergency clinic for a reunion with Dr. Lon Randall, right, and Julie Comeaux, the clinic's office manager and veterinary assistant. Rudy first entered the clinic after he was severely beaten by an intruder.

June Theriot had a similar experience with her dog, Rudy.

"We went to a school function for the children," she said. "When we returned home at 9 p.m., we found that someone had broken through the fence of our home. We found Rudy in the corner of the back yard."

Rudy, a miniature daschund, had been severely beaten and was bleeding from the nose and mouth. Theriot, a nurse, realized how serious Rudy's condition was.

In a panic, she dialed the number of the first veterinarian in the Lafayette phone book. It also rang through to the emergency clinic.

The vet told her to be in shock and then-called trauma to both eyes," she said. "There were bruises on the top half of his body and he had some teeth missing."

The vet at the clinic put Rudy on intravenous fluids to stabilize him and told Hulin he would probably need surgery to regain the vision in one eye.

"They referred me to my own vet for the surgery," she said.

The staff at the clinic handles all types of emergencies.

"The most common things we see," Randall said, "is comparable to what you might see in pediatrics - vomiting, diarrhea or trauma, like being hit by a car."

 Randall said he also sees his share of emergency Caesarean sections, abscesses and gunshot wounds.

"You never know what you're going to see." The clinic, which occupies a spot on Westwart Boulevard, has been in existence since 1993, and was founded by three area veterinarians, Dr. Ednaden Corley, Dr. Toby Wexler and Dr. Eddie Edston.

"The purpose," Randall said, "is to provide quality emergency care. The patients have one central location to go to. You don't have to page your vet and meet them at the clinic."

Today, about 10-15 vets belong to the system - that accounts for all but a few of the vets in Lafayette. There are a few good reasons a vet would want to have such a facility around.

"It gives them time off," Randall said. "They don't have to be on call 24 hours. They can just forward their calls to the clinic."

It also allows for better care of their patients who need observation.

"It's a way to keep patients in the hospital," Randall said. "Someone is there all night. In the past, vets would check on patients at night, but wouldn't sleep in the clinics."

But even if your vet isn't a member of the group or you don't have a regular vet, you can still use the clinic if you have an emergency.

"We'll take anybody and everybody," Randall said.

Randall made it clear that the clinic exists for the sole purpose of emergency treatment.

"If they don't have a regular vet," he said, "and the problem needs more than outpatient care, we insist that they choose one."

The "regular vet" handles any follow-up care that may be necessary.

"We send the regular vet a copy of the medical records by fax or mail," Randall said. Of course, as with any medical care, the services aren't free. There is an emergency room fee, plus the cost of whatever services and tests are performed.

But for devoted pet lovers like Theriot, it is well worth it.

"They don't have been there," she said, "I would have lost my dog."