

*Pat Owen*  
*How Ripley Got Her Silver Teeth*

The call from the painter was not unexpected; contract workers often call owners at work to check some exactness in detail. But Stacey Hassard's painter did not ask if eggshell was really what she wanted. "Uh, is your dog supposed to be standing in the middle of your driveway?" the man asked.

Rocky, a six-year-old American Staffordshire terrier was supposed to be in his kennel in the garage. When Hassard got home and examined the dog, she found a serious problem. "He had broken off the top of his fang and the pink root was exposed," she said, "so I took him to our regular vet, who doesn't do dentistry and he referred us here."

Here is Shoreline Veterinary Dental Clinic, home to the only full-time veterinarian dentists in Washington. The unassuming brick-front office, hidden behind shrubs along the concrete of Aurora Avenue North, is a converted home housing the dental clinic and a traditional veterinarian practice.

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Doug DuPont and Linda DeBowes are licensed and certified members of the American Dental Veterinarian College, two of just 70 board-certified animal dentists in the world. DuPont has practiced veterinarian medicine since 1981 and DeBowes taught students in the Midwest for 17 years before joining the Shoreline clinic.

While the American Staffordshire's injury was traumatic, Ripley, an 18-month-old Jack Russell terrier, had a less conspicuous problem. All four canine teeth were wearing down where she clutched the ball during her retrievals with owner Becky Hudson.

Hudson brushed Ripley's teeth faithfully, so when she also saw blood on a rear molar, she took the dog to the Jack Russell's regular vet. "The vet said she had never seen a crack so fresh," Hudson said. Many owners fail to notice tooth problems until the infection causes a lump under the dog's eye the veterinarian told the Seattle woman.

"I figured the vet would pull her molar tooth, but I was really worried about the four canine teeth," Hudson said, "I thought how will she catch her ball?" The veterinarian

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surprised Ripley's owner with a referral to the Shoreline dental clinic. "I had no idea there were dentists for dogs," the terrier's owner said.

The Shoreline specialists only treat animals with health-impacting problems. A few owners have asked the board-certified specialists to improve their show-quality dogs bite appearance for competition. They were turned away.

"We will not perform a procedure for cosmetic reasons only," DuPont said. "There is an ethical consideration," DeBowes echoed. A malocclusion, when a tooth does not fit properly with its lower companion tooth, will not be repaired if the animal is not suffering or headed for a serious problem.

DeBowes performed root canals to repair the Staffordshire's broken fang and the Jack Russell's cracked and bleeding molar. The veterinarian then offered an alternative to pulling the four rapidly eroding canine teeth. Ripley's fang teeth could be measured and fit with silver metallic caps.

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Hudson asked if the caps would be in place permanently. DeBowes said yes, so the Seattle woman scheduled the procedure. “I’ve had braces and I know if you pull teeth the other teeth shift to new positions,” Ripley’s owner said, “I didn’t think that would be good for her jaw or bite.”

The Shoreline vets say that animal owners repeatedly expect this type and level of care for their pets even though repair work can be costly. A root canal in a canine or fang tooth costs around \$900 and a crown can be as much as \$600. Some Seattle-area veterinarians also do root canals, but do not specialize in the dental procedures and are not board-certified.

The pair also repair tooth problems for cats and zoo animals. DeBowes once performed a root canal on a Bengal tiger. “They wheeled him in on a gurney,” she said. Late last week, the dental veterinarians did three different procedures on three different dogs.

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**Treatment Day**

The procedure space is in the treatment and boarding area and is small. Rocky lies anesthetized, ready for his procedure as Franz Dieter, a nine-year-old dachshund is prepared for the second table. Less than two feet separate the metal platforms.

A tan x-ray arm, like it's cousin appendage in a human dentist office, swings between both tables, swooping in for a quick shot of the larger dog's repaired tooth and, later, a close look at a lesion on the dachshund's lower gum.

Two veterinarian technicians move quietly around and through the tight space, retrieving vet-specified equipment, responding to the monitoring station's beeps, grabbing a portable headset so consultation calls from other veterinarians can be taken by DeBowes and DuPont and, finally, doing the mundane, but owner-appreciated nail clipping.

**ROCKY**

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DeBowes, in wide goggles with thimble-sized magnification cylinders in the lower portion of each lens, cradles the square-jawed dog's heavy head and peers in at the root canal she did last year. The tooth is healing nicely.

Inspecting his other teeth, she notices a slight cut. She said she thinks the tan and white-muzzled dog chewed on a stick and crunched it down between the teeth. She will ask Hassard to keep an eye on the wound. A quick clean of his teeth and Rocky's procedure is over.

On a quiet word from DeBowes, the technicians converge shoulder-to-shoulder to dead-man lift the steroidal and groggy Rocky back to his recovery kennel.

**Franz Dieter**

His former tablemate dwarfs the black-tipped dachshund and his small teeth clarify the necessity of the magnification chip on a second set of goggles that DuPont now slips over his head. Franz is back at the dental clinic for his third root canal.

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Dachshunds are pre-disposed to tooth problems because of the shape of their head the specialist said. With the elongated nose and thin bone plates, periodontal pockets are likely to form. “An infected pocket can cause devastating problems,” DuPont said.

DuPont treats a new pocket with a gel to close the opening while it heals with antibiotics in the sealant. An infection in a periodontal pocket can get deeper and eventually break into the nose. “They chronically sneeze and are just miserable animals,” DuPont explained.

Franz’s root canal takes much longer than Rocky’s check-up, so the technicians tag-team again to move the gangly Josie, an eight-month Flat-Coated Retriever, over to Rocky’s vacated table for a procedure using passive force orthodontia. One of the black dog’s upper canine teeth is coming in at an odd angle and cutting into her lower gum.

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DeBowes creates a device called an acrylic incline plane. She sprinkles a loose powder against the dog's lower teeth and dampens it with an acrid-smelling liquid. The material hardens as DeBowes molds it to catch and slide the tooth down a trough she shaves into the material. This moves the tooth away from tender tissue.

When the dental procedures are over, the clinicians prepare for several afternoon appointments. Franz Dieter's owner is bringing in a younger dog from the house. Seems Franz's owner found a stray bone chip lying around. DuPont examined the chip and knew immediately it was from the upper fourth molar.

But Franz's tooth at that location had no problem. Besides that, the tooth was from a less mature dog. The owner mentioned the second dog in the house, so Franz's kennel mate is scheduled to see DeBowes. She will know right where to look for the damaged tooth.