

SOCIAL INITIATIVE



WHERE COMPASSION NEVER CLOCKS OUT

Besant Memorial Animal Dispensary (BMAD)

By Shobana Ravi



There is no grand sign announcing the thousands of lives that have passed through these gates. No monument honours the abandoned puppies that found families, the accident victims that learnt to walk again, the neglected horses that recovered, or the blackbuck that returned to the wild. There are no plaques celebrating the countless community dogs that arrived frightened and broken, only to leave healthy and whole.

There is simply a team that returns every morning, ready to begin again.

Today, the Besant Memorial Animal Dispensary (BMAD) has grown into one of Chennai's largest animal welfare hospitals, treating close to 2,300 animals every month. 11 veterinarians, 6 managers, 30 caretakers, 3 operation theatres, advanced diagnostic

laboratories and a dedicated Wildlife Treatment and Transit Centre now occupy a campus that once consisted of little more than a modest shelter with two veterinarians and a single caretaker.

Its journey, is a story of quiet determination, of people who chose compassion over convenience and stayed long enough to watch a dream take shape. Seven years ago, Neeraja arrived at BMAD as a volunteer. "I never imagined I would be here," she smiles. "It was pure serendipity. I simply stayed." At that time, the shelter functioned on limited resources. The focus was straightforward—provide refuge to abandoned and injured animals and do the best possible with whatever was available.

Then came the pandemic. While much of the city slowed to a halt, BMAD continued



functioning with just two examination tables that doubled as an outpatient clinic for a few hours every day. Sterilisation programmes continued wherever possible, and every recovered animal reinforced an important lesson: even small systems, when built with consistency, can become the foundation for something extraordinary.

As the years passed, standard operating procedures were introduced, the medical team expanded, and social media unexpectedly became one of the organisation's greatest allies. Stories of rescued animals found their way into people's homes, inspiring volunteers, donors and everyday citizens to become part of the hospital's growing community.

Four years ago, BMAD formally opened its outpatient department. Neeraja explains, "People had the option of government

hospitals or expensive private hospitals. There was very little in between." That middle ground quickly became indispensable.

Today, the hospital performs nearly 300 sterilisation surgeries and more than 50 major surgeries every month, with most treatments heavily subsidised - and often entirely free for those unable to pay. No animal is turned away.

"If someone genuinely cannot afford treatment," says Neeraja, "we simply ask them to pay it forward someday." The same philosophy guides its adoption programme. "The goal isn't just to rescue an animal, but to ensure it finds a permanent, loving home."

For Dr. Josika, the hospital's evolution has unfolded from a unique vantage point.



Around forty animals remain admitted for intensive care, while teams perform between 14 and 18 sterilisation procedures daily alongside several complex surgeries. Large domestic animals occupy another section of the campus, while the Wildlife Treatment and Transit Centre cares for dozens of rescued wild animals every month.

Visitors are often surprised by the sophistication of the medical infrastructure. Digital radiography, ultrasonography, haematology and biochemistry laboratories now support treatment, with partnerships providing access to advanced diagnostics whenever required.

But for Dr. Josika, infrastructure tells only part of the story. "Our dream isn't simply to build one excellent hospital," she says. "It's to strengthen animal welfare everywhere by helping other organisations improve veterinary care too." Yet behind every successful surgery lies another reality. Compassion fatigue, burnout and high suicide rates among veterinarians are well documented worldwide.

"In this profession," she reflects quietly, "you learn where to care deeply - and where to detach just enough to return tomorrow."

Long before BMAD became one of Chennai's busiest animal hospitals, Shravan Krishnan imagined a very different future. As a young man, cricket occupied his world. He represented Tamil Nadu before an injury forced him to reconsider his path. Growing up around rescued and fostered animals had planted a seed that never really disappeared. In 2011, he started a dog boarding facility. Alongside it, he established a small rescue shelter and volunteered extensively with the Forest Department during wildlife rescues. Everything changed in 2017. After approaching the Theosophical Society with the idea of creating a larger animal welfare initiative, the then President

Tim Boyd entrusted him with reviving and managing the Society's long-standing animal dispensary. A crowdfunding campaign followed. Public support exceeded every expectation.

What emerged over the next few years was far more than an expanded shelter. It became an integrated animal welfare hospital serving nearly one lakh animals annually, with patients arriving not only from Chennai but also neighbouring districts and states.

Today, BMAD functions as a collaborative ecosystem where volunteers transport injured animals, neighbourhood residents monitor community dogs, donors subsidise treatment and rescuers work alongside veterinarians to save lives. Its work extends well beyond cats and dogs. Abandoned horses, cattle and other large domestic animals receive treatment and rehabilitation here. During the pandemic, neglected beach horses found temporary refuge within the campus.

The Wildlife Treatment and Transit Centre, operating in association with the Forest Department, provides emergency care to species ranging from lorises and pangolins to porcupines and blackbucks before they are scientifically rehabilitated and released into their natural habitats. Separate treatment facilities ensure wildlife and domestic animals remain protected from cross-infection.

At the same time, BMAD continues to champion one of the most effective long-term solutions for urban animal welfare - scientific sterilisation. The hospital now performs around 5,000 Animal Birth Control surgeries every year.

Shravan believes these programmes have transformed entire neighbourhoods. "There are areas around the Theosophical Society where the street dog population has reduced dramatically through sustained sterilisation," he says. "A shelter is never

the right place for a healthy animal," and "The humane solution is sterilisation, vaccination and responsible community care."

Ask the people at BMAD what they are most proud of, and remarkably, very few speak about numbers. Neeraja speaks about never turning away an animal in need. Dr. Josika speaks about building systems that other welfare organisations can replicate. Shravan speaks first of gratitude - to the Theosophical Society, whose legacy of compassion stretches back to the animal dispensary established under Rukmini Devi Arundale in the 1970s, and to every volunteer, donor and rescuer who has helped build what exists today.

For years, every available resource went towards improving the lives of animals. Only recently has the organisation begun investing in its own people - creating dining spaces, better waiting areas and spaces that acknowledge the emotional weight carried by those who spend every day confronting suffering. Behind every successful surgery is someone who stayed beyond their shift. Behind every adoption is someone who refused to give up.

Behind every animal that returned to the wild, every community dog that was healed instead of abandoned, and every frightened creature that found a second chance, is a team that quietly chose compassion over convenience.

Perhaps that is what makes the Besant Memorial Animal Dispensary one of Chennai's true champions because, day after day, without fanfare or expectation of reward, its people make one simple, extraordinary choice - to stand beside the city's voiceless animals when they need someone the most. In a world that often measures success by profit or recognition, they have chosen instead to measure it by lives healed, suffering eased, and hope restored. And for that quiet, unwavering commitment, they are truly Champions of Chennai.

She first came to BMAD nearly a decade ago as a volunteer, already certain that veterinary medicine - and specifically animal welfare - was where she belonged.

The journey demanded resilience. Veterinary science combined demanding medical training with animal husbandry, while opportunities for meaningful practical exposure remained limited. Women veterinarians, she recalls, often had to work harder to be recognised as decision-makers. That landscape has changed significantly.

After joining BMAD as a junior veterinarian, she gradually assumed greater responsibility before becoming Chief Veterinarian five years ago. Her promotion also reflected a deeper organisational strength. Today, she oversees every aspect of the hospital's medical services.

On any given day, between 80 and 120 outpatients walk through its doors.