Loving Emergency Work in South Auckland: Battling Parvo with Hope, Heart, & Vaccines

Working in emergency veterinary medicine at an after-hours clinic in South Auckland is equal parts challenge and reward.

We regularly see dogs injured in car accidents, cats with sudden obstructions, and pets suffering severe allergic reactions or poisoning. The work is unpredictable. It's exhausting. But it's profoundly meaningful, because we're there when pets need us most, and the community we serve treats animals like family.

We stand by our commitment night after night. We thrive on staying calm at 3 a.m., acting resourcefully under pressure, and finding hope amid crises. We wouldn't trade this work for anything.

But there's one disease that cuts through all our skill and adrenaline and leaves only deep, unnecessary heartbreak: ***canine parvovirus (parvo).***

Manukau After Hours Veterinary Clinic opened in 1996 as a dedicated after-hours emergency veterinary clinic. Practice Manager, Jedda Ford, has been manager for 17 years and says "the increased parvo case load continues to have an ongoing negative impact on our vets and nurses and we wanted to provide an opportunity for prevention."

Head Veterinary Nurse, Charlotte Martin, has been an emergency nurse for 7 years and says "the increasing number of parvo cases, lack of client education and veterinary staff burn out takes its toll. We have spent hours having meetings about what we can do as an emergency provider to avoid the heavy euthanasia work load that parvo brings. Most of our parvo cases have never been to see a vet, they don't know about preventative care, there's no regulation around dog ownership aside from registration at your local council. Families pick up free puppies and within weeks they're on our door in tears begging for a miracle."

"We don't want dogs or families suffering this relentless virus, providing free vaccinations and education is the only way we can even begin to make a impact in the issue. We are often called heartless on a daily basis throughout summer because we have to discuss costs and more often than not, euthanasia is the only option, none of us want to end a life, especially over a preventable virus or because of costs, but vets do this on a daily basis, with often, no understanding and therefore no appreciation from owners. They don't see the tears shed by staff over the body of another parvo dog that we gently and carefully have to wrap and label as "contaminated" for cremation companies to collect.

We want to start a change with the narrative around vets and if we can make a positive impact for one family, one puppy, we know that while it's only a small start, it's a start."

Parvo: The Preventable, Relentless Killer

Parvo is wholly preventable. A few simple vaccines can shield puppies and even adult dogs, from a highly contagious, often deadly virus. Yet, almost every month, we see a steady stream of parvo cases from families who didn't know their dog was at risk, or couldn't afford the vaccine or treatment.

Clinically, parvo assaults the dog's body relentlessly. The virus targets rapidly dividing cells, especially in the intestinal tract and bone marrow, leading to violent vomiting, haemorrhagic diarrhoea, dehydration, immune suppression, and often sepsis. Treatment requires aggressive intervention: intravenous fluids, broad-spectrum antibiotics, anti-nausea medication, pain relief, frequent blood glucose checks, and constant nursing. Even with this intensive multi-day care, survival rates often hover just over 50%, heavily dependent on how early veterinary care begins.

In short, if untreated, parvo is almost always fatal. And even when therapy is available, survival isn't guaranteed.

South Auckland Under Strain: Real-World Parvo Impact

South Auckland isn't isolated from this crisis; it's at the heart of it.

- In our clinic alone, we have seen 1,380 cases in 24 months of dogs that have had consultations with our vets and received outpatient care for parvo, this number unfortunately does not encompass the dogs that die while they are on their way to us to be seen or are presented so recumbent the only option provided left is euthanasia.
- Clinicians note that post-COVID puppy booms and cost-of-living pressures have exacerbated gaps in basic pet care. More dogs, fewer vaccinations, longer waitlists, and rising parvo cases form a tragic feedback cycle.

The Human Toll

In textbooks, parvo is neat data: a disease, a protocol. In reality, it is the trembling puppy cradled at midnight, the owner who can't afford treatment, the staff who bear yet another preventable loss.

Every euthanasia due to parvo sears the memory of the puppy who didn't have to die. It's emotionally crushing, for owners and for every member of the veterinary team.

But what makes parvo uniquely painful is that it doesn't have to happen. With timely, affordable vaccination, these tragedies disappear.

Taking Action: Our Community Vaccination Day

That's why we've organised a community vaccination initiative: over two weekends (four weeks apart), we'll offer free parvo vaccinations to at least 100 dogs, prioritising unvaccinated puppies and high-risk dogs in South Auckland.

Our objectives are straightforward but powerful:

- Prevent new parvo infections.
- Reduce environmental viral load, limiting spread.
- Protect whole communities by raising herd immunity.
- Remove financial and logistical barriers to essential care.
- Encourage dog owners to have a proactive ongoing relationship with their veterinarian

We aim not just to treat illness—but to stop it before it starts.

Why Preventive Work Matters to Us

Emergency vets are trained to act decisively at the crisis point. Prevention isn't glamorous—it's quiet, relational, long-term. Yet it's where the most profound impact happens.

This vaccination drive protects dogs and people. Owners shouldn't have to lose a pet to price. Our team shouldn't endure repeated grief over preventable cases.

We love our work in emergency medicine in South Auckland. The challenge, the community, the late-night rescues, they all mean something deeply personal. But parvo? That one we shouldn't still be seeing in such great numbers in 2025 when a simple vaccine could spare so much suffering.

We don't just provide a free vaccination, we spend our time educating owners on the importance of preventative care, assisting them to find a GP vet clinic in their area, talking about regular flea and worm treatments, annual booster vaccinations, not owning an unvaccinated puppy on a property where owners have recently lost another dog to parvo, puppy socialising, and for many of our clients who turn up to vaccinations days, for the first time it's their first encounter with a vet. We want to encourage relationships with vets in a positive light, not just there for the end of stage or emergencies.

What's Next

These vaccination days are just the start. If it proves effective, we hope it inspires:

- Broader public awareness and community-driven vaccination campaigns.
- A shift from reactive rescue to proactive prevention.
- Positive relationships with client/vet clinics

None of this would be possible without support from our Directors, Shareholder Clinics, suppliers donating or reducing costs for us to provide vaccinations, and our incredible staffing team who all volunteer their time and passion to pull these community events together.

Emergency vets will always be needed at 3 a.m. But our goal is simple: fewer preventable emergencies like parvo.

If even one puppy survives because of this effort: if one family avoids heartbreak, one team avoids grief, then every hour, every vaccine, every outreach moment will have been worth it.

MANUKAU after hours veterinary CLINIC

Article written and supplied by Charlotte Martin, Head Veterinary Nurse, on behalf of Manukau After Hours Veterinary Clinic