

The Animal Savior

Prosthetist and orthotist Shimada Akio has rescued tens of thousands of pets since he launched his company over a decade ago.

by **Matthew Herson**



Shimada Akio inspects the left hind prosthetic leg of Pod.



The gorgeous looking bloodhound mix, Pod is going strong despite losing both his left legs.

Japan is a nation known for providing excellent health care and that stretches not only to humans but to animals as well. In a country where there are more registered pets than children under the age of 15, citizens can feel secure knowing their cherished dog or cat will be well looked after if their pets get sick. Huge efforts have also been made to find new homes for pets in need of adoption and in the fiscal year 2018, not one dog or cat was culled in Tokyo.

There are many first-class veterinary hospitals in the city. A prime example is Minamino Animal Hospital located in Hachioji, a charming western suburb of the capital that is surrounded by greenery. Working out of the same hospital is Shimada Akio, an affable and humble individual who has rescued more than 20,000 pets since he started his business around 13 years ago. He is not a doctor, but a technician, making prosthetics and orthotics for animals. Seeing the joy on the faces of the patients and their owners as he works his magic is truly a wonderful sight.

“At vocational college I studied prosthetics (in which a limb is replaced entirely) and orthotics (where a device is used to support limbs) for humans, however, I decided to focus my thesis on animals as nobody was doing that in Japan at the time,” he says. “Through my research, which included many books and websites as well as surveys sent out to 200 pet owners and 100 vets, I realized there was a lot of room for development in the field.”

Shimada went on to work as a technician at an orthosis company for four years. His desire to help animals, though, grew stronger after he witnessed a vet hand-crafting a corset for a chihuahua owned by a senior colleague. After three years of training at a veterinary hospital, he established his own company in 2007 and quickly became a pioneer in animal prostheses.

“Initially it was said that animals do not need artificial limbs and what I was doing was nothing more than an expensive pastime,” recalls the prosthetist. “Attitudes have

changed over time and there is now the growing realization that these procedures clearly improve their quality of life. My purpose is not to make something that looks like the leg of an animal, but rather create devices that are functional. Hair, for instance, adds an unnecessary burden for them.”

A typical consultation begins with Dr. Hiroma Junshiro, the director of the Minamino Animal Hospital, undertaking a medical examination of the animal; Shimada then makes a decision based on the diagnosis of the doctor. The pair have a strong working relationship and that, the youthful-looking 39-year-old believes, is one of the main reasons for his success. He also emphasizes the importance of providing clarity to pet owners, including times when the use of prosthetics is not necessary or may not be successful.

A recent example of this was with an adorable Pomeranian named Sou who was born with deformed paws. Realizing that prosthetic replacements would put extra tension onto the shoulder, Shimada suggested leaving things as

they were and evaluating the situation again in the future as the dog seemed comfortable. He is motivated purely by the well-being of the pets and their owners.

Another patient visiting on the same day was Pod, a beautiful bloodhound mix that lost both its front and back left legs. Despite the impairments, the courageous dog is going strong, having fully adapted to a prosthetic frontal limb. He was in the hospital for a fitting on his left hind leg which will make walking that much more bearable. The appreciation shown by the owners toward Shimada showed just how important his work is.

A highly respected figure, he has appeared on various TV shows and given lectures at universities. He is constantly looking to evolve and plans to use 3D printers in the future. It is all for the benefit of his patients as he tries to make their lives more comfortable. Like so many animal health workers in Tokyo, Shimada provides an invaluable service, helping to save numerous pets. He is a true hero.