

Does your pet goldfish suffer from tumors, broken bones, impacted eggs or unattractive scales? The prognosis is getting better: increasing numbers of vets are ready to do the needed surgeries.

# Fixing Nemo

By Rebecca Skloot

Photographs by Max Auilera-Hellweg

**D**r. Helen Roberts was about to make the first incision in what should have been a standard surgery—a quick in-and-out procedure—when she froze. “Bonnie,” she said, turning to her anesthesiologist, “is she breathing? I don’t see her breathing.” Roberts’s eyes darted around the room. “Grab the Doppler,” she told her other assistant. “Bonnie pushed up her purple glasses, leaned over the surgery table and lowered her face inches from the patient to watch for any signs of breath: nothing. “She’s too deep,” Roberts said, “go ahead and give her 30 c.c.’s of fresh water.” Bonnie picked up an old plastic jug filled with pond water and poured two plugs into the anesthesia machine. Seconds later, a whisper of a heart rate came through the Doppler. Bonnie wasn’t happy: “We have gill movement—but not much.” Then the Doppler went silent and she reached for the jug. “Wait,” Roberts said. “We have fin movement. . . . damn, she’s waking up—30 c.c.’s of anesthetic.” Roberts sighed. “She was holding her breath,” she said, shaking her head. “Fish are a lot smarter than people give them credit for.”

Yes, Roberts and Bonina (Bonnie) Wolf were doing surgery on a goldfish. Not the fancy kind that people buy for thousands of dollars and keep in decorative ponds (though they do surgery on those too), but on a county-fair goldfish named the Golden One, which Roberts adopted when its previous owners brought it into her clinic outside Buffalo, saying they didn’t have time to take care of it. Which is to say, it’s a regular fish that could belong to anybody. Just like Lucky, the one-and-a-half-pound koi with a two-and-a-half-pound tumor; Sunshine, who was impaled on a branch during rough sex; Beta, with a fluid-filled abdomen; and countless goldfish with so-called buoyancy disorders, like the per-

Fish Are Friends *In the vanguard of “small-pet veterinary sciences,” Dr. Helen Roberts performs an elective gonadectomy—the removal of ovaries or testes, depending on what the finds—on “the Golden One.”*