

Compliance: Getting Those Dentistry Cases to the Table!

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A well-known fact: The statistic is that 70-80% of all companion animals over the age of three have some level of periodontal disease. Yet, it is probably the most ignored disease in dogs and cats. Most practice websites strongly tout that they are *wellness practices*. Can they say that if, indeed, they are not recommending dentistry services and care?

Before an individual ever entered a veterinary technician school, they were already trained by the veterinary practices they took their own pets to, how very important vaccines are. We have come to expect that a wellness visit to the vet may very well include vaccines. These are vaccines that the majority of pets will *most likely* never be exposed to. But, that same individual has been successfully trained to provide this care.

Now, vaccinating dogs and cats is an important practice. But, this scenario speaks to the truth of how veterinary professionals are trained, in their personal lives, in school and in their chosen practice. Yet, most pets would have never contracted any of the diseases for which they were vaccinated, but almost all will suffer with dental problems.

Interesting to know, a 2002 AAHA client-compliance survey revealed that the responsibility for the failure of owners to provide dental services for their pets was the person responsible for giving the recommendation. Most veterinarians felt that cost was the deciding factor against dentistry. The survey showed only 7% responded that cost was a factor. The survey showed that they actually either did not receive a recommendation for dentistry, they didn't understand the importance, and they forgot the recommendation or their vet didn't follow up. So, that means that each of these concerns must be managed before compliance will be gained. *Provide an informal survey to determine how many of your staff has provided dentistry within the last 18 months for their own pets, and if not....why? The responses will be eye opening as to what is going on internally as far as recommendations.

Training begins at the practice level. All staff members need to be on the same page as far as dentistry is concerned. This means that everyone from the receptionist to the practice administrator must understand their role and "buy in" to the importance of this care.

First, what is the impact of dental disease on the patient? The result of recent research demonstrates the association between inflammatory periodontal disease and cardiovascular disease, respiratory disease, liver disease, kidney disease, and joint disease. So, when the mouth is cared for, the vital organs are subsequently cared for.

What about patient comfort? Animals live with fractured teeth, multiple tooth root abscesses, oral ulcerations and more. But, because they do not stop eating, or become noticeably lethargic, many clients perceive that the pets are not uncomfortable. On the contrary, experience shows that most clients notice the positive change in behavior after the dentistry is provided.

So, how can train everyone on staff be trained? Staff meetings and staff education. Close the practice down for 2-3 hours and provide the staff with that training. Receptionists should understand dentistry services, terminology and products dispensed.

Technicians should be trained to “flip the lip” every time they examine a pet. The veterinarians should be trained to discuss the oral status and make appropriate notations in the permanent medical record every time they perform a physical exam.

Also, when a recommendation is made by the veterinarian that dentistry should be provided, reminder cards can be generated by most veterinary software packages.

Along with the staff, the clients have to begin to expect a report about their pet’s mouth as much as they expect vaccines. The clients will come to expect this when the practice is consistently saying the same message time and time again. It is no coincidence that large companies spend millions of dollars interrupting programming on television repetitively. It may take a client 10 times of hearing that their pet needs to have dentistry before they value the information enough to jump over the barriers to that care.

Many drug companies provide professional posters highlighting oral disease. These can be placed around the practice. Some practices create photo albums filled with before and after photographs. Practice websites can have articles and case presentations stressing positive outcomes. Computer software makes it possible for the practice to produce brochures informing clients of the importance of good oral care.

After expensive dentistry procedures, technicians experience clients lamenting that, *if they had only known*, they would never have let their beloved pet’s mouth get so bad. To give them the critical information required to maintain their pet’s oral health, your practice could provide monthly seminars for the clients on dentistry. This seminar can be provided by an industrious technician passionate about this subject.

As stated above, cost is a barrier, but more prevalent is the fear of anesthesia. Your practice can create a PowerPoint presentation explaining that you minimize anesthetic risk to the patient and how you do that:

- Complete physical examination
- Heart auscultation
- Lab work is provided prior to the procedure to ensure that the kidneys and liver are functioning properly.
- Tailored anesthetic drug protocols for each patient
- Elegant monitoring (show photos of pulse oximeter, ECG, blood pressure monitor, Bare Hugger, IV fluids, IV fluid pump)
- Certified veterinary technicians are responsible for monitoring their pet

Clients also need to hear that if there are any concerning changes on any of the monitor devices, steps will be taken to correct it. If the necessary changes do not improve, the patient will be recovered and rescheduled using a different anesthetic protocol. **Treat every pet as if it were your own.**

The presentation also can walk the client through some clinical cases. Use clinical photos that look normal but show the radiographs that prove otherwise. These cases provide the opportunity to discuss:

- Different grades of dental disease
- Resorptive lesions
- Periodontal disease
- Fractured teeth
- Malocclusions
- Tooth crowding
- Retained deciduous teeth
- Dentigerous cysts

Gingival hyperplasia
Chronic ulcerative paradental syndrome
Lymphocytic Plasmacytic Stomatitis
Others

You can also discuss:

Tooth brushing
Dental diets
Veterinary Oral Health Council acceptance
OraVet Dental Chews
Sealants
Water additives
Appropriate chew toys

These are some ideas of how to incorporate communication and marketing strategies into your practice in order to treat the most prevalent disease we come across. The benefit to the patient is better overall health and a dramatic decrease in undisclosed pain.

To simplify the client education process, PetED Veterinary Education and Training Resources (www.PetED4VetCE.com) has created a series of client focused educational videos discussing all the above information. Subscription to these videos enables the practice to consistently provide the same information to every client, decrease the time spent discussing these issues in that tight 20-minute office visit and a way to grow the dentistry department in every practice.

Education is critical. There are countless examples in human medicine where patient outcomes improve dramatically when the care taker fully understands the cost of neglect versus the benefits of proper care.

The payback to the practice is multifold. When we effectively educate the client, compliance increases. This benefits the practice (increased revenue and more routine care), the client (more frequent care is more cost effective and shorter anesthetic experiences), and it truly gives the veterinary profession the opportunity to provide that which they profess on their websites; good wellness care for their patients.