

ADDING REPRODUCTION TO YOUR PRACTICE: THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY

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In determining whether to establish a small animal theriogenology interest in your clinic, you must first decide on the extent of your offerings. Do you simply want to offer basic services to the occasional breeder in need of ovulation timing or artificial insemination? Do you want to provide fresh chilled services and/or semen freezing services? Or is a full service reproductive practice your plan? A warning is essential to anyone hoping to offer only limited services. Once you embark on this journey, you will find yourself bombarded with requests for more extensive services. A full service theriogenology practice offers infertility diagnosis, neonatology, semen freezing, and OFA or Penn Hip procedures. You will also see an increase in micro-chipping services, after-hours inseminations, and emergency and elective caesarian sections.

What benefits expected from establishing a reproductive aspect to your practice? Benefits are multiple. We have experienced a measurable growth in our pet client base simply from referrals of locally sold puppies we have helped to create. Clients perceive increased quality of service because of our specialty interest. Most importantly, our dog breeder clientele generates more revenue in nonreproductive service areas. Breeders often request more involved workups, diagnostics, and treatments than the average pet owner and will solicit your services for these services once they have established a trust and rapport with you. This allows for development of your practice in areas other than reproduction. Ultrasound machines, acquired solely for pregnancy diagnosis, see use for prostate, bladder, and testicular imaging. Complete abdominal ultrasound imaging for non-reproductive evaluations soon follows. Rigid endoscopy units acquired for trans-cervical insemination also permit utilization for all other uses for endoscopy. Once you have the light source and ancillary equipment, a flexible endoscope will be a tempting addition. Certainly, acquisition of reproductive equipment that lends itself to multipurpose use is fiscally wise, and improves the overall quality of practice you can offer.

Many avenues exist for the development of a reproductive interest. Options include hiring an associate with theriogenology experience or sharing practice space with a boarded theriogenologist. If a general practitioner is interested in developing his or her own knowledge base, a good place to start is with domestic and international continuing education courses, such as those offered by the SFT/ACT meetings. Specific technique training such as surgical insemination, endoscopic trans-cervical insemination and others can be learned through continuing education courses, or mentoring privately with a reproductive specialist. Many colleagues were more than willing to make time in their practices to allow me to observe, when I was developing my own techniques. Conventional residency training programs are but may not be possible for the practitioner working full time in a busy practice. The ACT does have a mentoring residency program which allows the practitioner to work toward board certification while continuing to work full-time. The mentoring program requires identification of a board

certified theriogenologist to mentor the practitioner through the process. The mentoring route also requires proficiency in all species.

Most franchises offer training in conjunction with franchise purchase. If you decide to offer canine semen freezing services, franchise purchase is an option to consider. This avenue provides the practitioner with “one stop shopping” that includes education and training, equipment sources, extender provision, etc. Franchise purchase also comes with the potential disadvantages of contract limitations and proprietary restrictions. In considering a franchise purchase, the practitioner is advised to carefully scrutinize franchise options, with attention being paid to training and support, ease of freezing protocols, reported pregnancy success rates, and the financial contract. It is not unusual to achieve success rates in the 80-85% range.

Remote semen freezing is another option. If a limited offering with frozen semen is your expectation, there are companies and universities which provide services for remote freezing of canine semen. Remote freezing relieves the practitioner of maintaining on-premises liquid nitrogen, storage tanks, and dewars. Nothing more is required than to fresh chill the semen sample and ship it overnight in routine fashion. Remote freezing can be offered without specific contract or franchise purchase. It also allows you to provide a freezing service to local breeders without as much expense to you. It offers your clients a way to freeze semen without having to travel distant freezing centers.

Providing fresh chilled services is easy. Products can be purchased by almost anyone, including non-veterinarians. However, AKC requirements for registering “fresh chilled puppies” stipulate that both semen collection and insemination be performed by licensed veterinarians. This is not true for on-site artificial inseminations with fresh semen. Anyone may perform these as long as they fill out the required paperwork. Please note that in your reproductive practice, registration request forms for artificially inseminated puppies. There are two different AKC registration forms, one fresh chilled inseminations and a second for simple “on the same premises” AI’s.

Depending on the scope of services you plan to offer, the AKC may have other requirements. For example, if you plan to freeze semen, your facility, procedures, and recordkeeping must be approved by the AKC. Certainly, franchise companies will walk franchise purchasers through this process. If however, you plan to remain independent, you must contact the AKC to ensure compliance with all of their requirements.

When preparing fresh chilled semen for shipment, it is important have the accompanying paperwork in order. It is a good idea to set up and strictly follow your own protocol as regards processing and paperwork. Records should be maintained in duplicate, one copy is for your records and the second copy accompanies the shipment. Ideally, your paperwork should provide a full record of motility, morphology, method of collection and extension, and identification of the dog collected. It is helpful for the inseminating veterinarian to contact the collecting vet, and indicate what method of insemination is being done, volume of extended semen required, extender preferences, timing methods etc. to keep everyone “on the same page.” I am still surprised in our practice when we receive a sample with little to no identification, no record of pre-shipment motility, and excessive volumes of extended semen. Several forms from different sources are available, or can be created in-house.

Once you have acquired the knowledge and equipment necessary to pursue your level of reproductive interest, you must determine how to “get the word out.” In the early years of my reproductive interest, speaking to local breed clubs on ovulation timing, neonatology, and fresh and frozen semen breedings helped to generate requests for those services. Breeders tend to be thirsty for knowledge and any offering of reproductive training or explanation is welcomed. Local breed club lectures often evolve into national specialty lectures. Speaking at your local, regional or state veterinary medical association or technician group meetings provides a possible referral base of colleagues. I also guest lectured at technician training programs in our state community college system. Membership in the SFT or other reproductive societies may put you on internet lists accessed by dog breeders. Finally, some state veterinary medical associations provide list serves on their websites for specialists and those members with special interests or practices limited to a particular field of veterinary medicine.

The inclusion of a theriogenology interest in our practice has enhanced the perceived and actual quality of care provided by our practice. It has also increased the number of ancillary services provided to our clients. Our clinic would probably not have pursued the addition of some of these services had we not begun working more extensively with our dog breeding clientele. It has truly been a win-win situation for the animals, the owners and our practice. I would encourage anyone with an interest in small animal theriogenology to whole-heartedly seek out the development of this aspect of practice. The expansion into theriogenology will require investment of your time, energy and resources. In the final analysis, the benefits to be gained by providing reproductive services in your practice far outweigh the costs.