

Selling Clients on the Value of Preventive Dentistry

Delaying care could lead to advanced disease and higher treatment costs

By Wendy S. Myers



A 9-year-old toy poodle yawns during her wellness exam and her bad breath knocks you in the nose. Button's grade 3 dental disease demands immediate care, but how can you sell the client on a \$500 procedure in today's economy?

Focus your conversation on medicine as well as money. Delaying care could lead to advanced disease and higher treatment costs. Here are strategies to convince clients that preventive dentistry is a savvy investment:

Get clients in the habit of routine cleanings. Doctors should assess dental disease every exam, assigning a Grade 1, 2, 3 or 4 to each patient. This medical recordkeeping habit encourages continuity of care in multi-doctor practices. Veterinarians can ask exam assistants to present a dental treatment plan whenever a pet scores Grade 2 or higher.

Here's how the doctor could present his recommendation: "Buttons has Grade 3 dental disease. She needs a professional dental cleaning now to slow the progression of her dental disease and treat the infection. As her dental disease gets worse, serious health problems can happen. It's common for pets to get painful abscesses or a toothache that causes them to eat less or not at all. Bacteria in the mouth can pass through the bloodstream and permanently damage the kidneys, heart, liver and lungs. A professional dental cleaning will remove built up tartar and plaque. I will have my technician explain our 12 steps of a professional dental cleaning and also talk with you about easy home-care products that fit into your schedule."

You also can link diagnostic codes in your veterinary software to print the appropriate treatment plan. Professional dental cleanings should be as routine as vaccinations and heartworm and intestinal parasite testing.

Dentistry is up 35 percent at a practice where I consulted because veterinarians set a standard of care that any patient with dental disease of Grade 2 or higher automatically gets a treatment plan. If the procedure isn't scheduled within 30 days, a technician calls the client with a courtesy reminder. For example, "The doctor asked me to call you about scheduling Button's

dental cleaning so we can treat and slow the progression of her dental disease. When would be a convenient time for you to schedule Button's dental cleaning...I have an opening on Friday or Monday...which best fits your schedule?"

If the client declines, the technician notes it in the medical record and tells the doctor. Then the veterinarian decides if he will make a follow-up call to stress the urgency of care. If the medical problem isn't serious, the doctor can revisit the importance of the procedure during the next wellness exam.

As a consultant, I recommend one follow-up call. Don't bombard the client with repeated messages and create the false impression that you're "selling" a professional service. You can get scripts and how-to advice from my book and 30-minute audio seminar, *How to Conduct Effective Reminder Calls & Callbacks* (720-344-2347 or www.csvets.com).



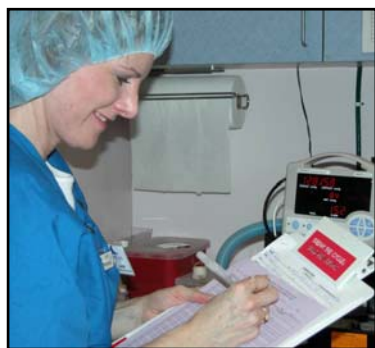
Explain that delaying care may result in advanced disease and higher treatment costs. A \$500 procedure could easily escalate into more extractions, x-rays, longer anesthesia time and medications. The client can pay you now...or pay you a lot more later. Long-term medical consequences such as kidney disease could take a toll on senior pets.

Offer third-party financing. Rather than arranging payment plans through your practice, establish relationships with companies such as CareCredit (www.carecredit.com) or Wells Fargo Health Advantage (www.financial.wellsfargo.com/retailservices/wfha_veterinarians.html). This lets clients make monthly payments to the financing company while you get paid promptly by the lender. Clients approved for CareCredit can qualify for 90 days at no interest or finance care for up to 60 months. Monthly payments can be as low as \$25 on a \$1,000 procedure.

Don't offer discounts during dental month. While National Pet Dental Health Month each February generates buzz about pet dental care, too many practices have enticed clients with discounts over the years. Practitioners wanted to promote business during a traditionally slower month. Over time, clients have accepted the need for routine pet dentistry and now expect a "deal" each February.

Client demand has caused many practices to extend dental month discounts into March and April to avoid angry mobs. Some hospitals even repeat the "dental sale" again in the fall, with bargains October through December. The problem compounds because clients who took

advantage of last year's dental sale return again the following year while new clients also sign up. Exhausted technicians feel the stress of quadruple the number of procedures. It's a lose-lose situation for patients and your practice.



Examine your fees for dental cleanings. Focus on everyday value pricing (think Wal-Mart) so every month is dental month. Create fee structures for Grade 1, 2, 3 and 4 professional dental cleanings. Have a 10 percent to 25 percent price difference between each category. A Grade 1 dental cleaning is the least expensive while a Grade 4 is the most costly. This encourages clients to get pets treated now rather than waiting until advanced disease is present. Staff could tell clients they don't need to wait until February because you've made the price affordable no matter what time of year.

In some communities, dentistry is becoming a phone-shopped service. You can never give an accurate estimate of dental fees from a phone conversation. A doctor needs to examine the patient to diagnose dental disease, needed medications before and after the procedure, possible extractions and the patient's current health status for anesthetic protocols.

Dogs have 42 teeth and cats have 30. Each one needs examined! Instead, focus on scheduling the exam. Quoting over the phone could make the caller feel victim to a bait-and-switch tactic or limit the dental services the patient receives. Your receptionist might say, "We would be happy to provide a treatment plan for your pet's professional dental cleaning. To give you an accurate fee, a doctor will need to examine your pet to determine the grade of dental disease, check for any loose or diseased teeth that may need to be extracted and assess your pet's overall health so we can use the best anesthetic protocols and medications. You'll also have an opportunity to get answers to all of your questions. During the exam, we can provide a written treatment plan that explains the specific services your pet would need and the fees. Our doctor exam is \$____. When would you like to schedule your pet's exam?"

Send dental reminders. Once a client has said yes to a professional dental cleaning, she'll be back for more. Link reminders to dental group codes. Whenever an invoice is generated, a reminder will automatically follow. A Grade 1 professional cleaning reminds every 12 months. A Grade 2 procedure reminds at nine months. Grade 3 reminds at six months. Grade 4 triggers a

reminder at three months. Here is a sample dental reminder from my book, *The Veterinary Practice Management Resource Book & CD* (720-344-2347 or www.csvets.com):

Dear pet name:

Our records show that it's time for your dental exam and/or cleaning. Your dental checkup includes:

- ✓ A dental exam and plan for good oral health
- ✓ Evaluation of whether you need a professional dental cleaning that cleans teeth above and below the gum line with an ultrasonic scaler and hand instruments.
- ✓ Nutritional advice on a dental diet and treats

P.S. Call us at 555-555-5555 today!

Through client education and affordable fees, you can bring good oral health to every patient. Your practice and the pets you care for will both be healthier!

About the Author:



Wendy S. Myers owns Communication Solutions for Veterinarians in Denver. Her consulting firm helps teams improve compliance, client service and practice management. Communication Solutions for Veterinarians has provided mystery phone shopper training to more than 2,600 receptionists nationwide. Wendy is a partner in Animal Hospital Specialty Center, a 13-doctor AAHA-accredited referral practice offering internal medicine, surgery, neurology, oncology, specialty dentistry, and emergency care in Highlands Ranch, Colorado. She is the author of four books and five videos. Subscribe to Communication Solutions for Veterinarians' e-newsletter on our website at: www.csvets.com. E-mail Wendy at: wmyers@csvets.com.