

Practice Tips – Hospital Management

Do you need a practice manager?

Veterinary hospitals need to be managed with the same business savvy as any profitable company. Once your hospital reaches three or more doctors, you may need a practice manager to oversee personnel, marketing, client concerns, financial management, and daily operations. A practice manager typically earns \$18 to \$20 per hour, according to a 2003 compensation study by the Veterinary Hospital Managers Association (www.vhma.org). Having a full-time manager lets doctors focus on being doctors who deliver medical services and produce income, avoiding management distractions. Client service, business operations, and revenue can improve significantly when you hire an effective manager.

Create Separate Prophy Prices Based on the Grade of Dental Disease

Many hospitals charge a flat rate for a dental prophy—regardless of whether it's a 1-year-old cat with stage 1 periodontal disease or a 17-year-old cat with a grade 4 mouth. To stress the importance of preventive care and regular professional dental cleanings, charge incremental prophy prices based on the grade of dental disease. Increase the prophy fee \$5 to \$10 for each grade of dental disease. For example:

- Grade 1 feline dental prophy = \$50
- Grade 2 feline dental prophy = \$55
- Grade 3 feline dental prophy = \$60
- Grade 4 feline dental prophy = \$65

Fees for preanesthetic blood work, anesthesia, IV catheter, fluids, monitoring, extractions, pain management, antibiotics, and other related services would be added to the total. Having categories of dental prophies and corresponding prices encourages clients to have their pets' teeth cleaned annually because the grade 1 prophy is significantly less expensive than grade 4.

Also coordinate reminder intervals based on the needed level of periodontal care. Heidi Lobprise, DVM, Diplomate American College of Veterinary Dentistry, recommends this reminder timeline:

- Stage 1: 12 month reminder for dental exam
 - Stage 2: 9 to 12 months (Send first reminder at 9 months, so most clients usually schedule within 12 months.)
 - Stage 3: 6 to 9 months
 - Stage 4: 4 to 6 months
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How to strengthen your reminders

To increase client compliance and hospital revenue, implement a three-tiered reminder system. Mail the first reminder postcard 3 weeks before the due date for the pet's healthcare services. Then mail a second reminder postcard with an urgent message 2 weeks after the pet is past due. If the client still has not booked an appointment, have a receptionist call the client for a third reminder phone call 3 weeks after

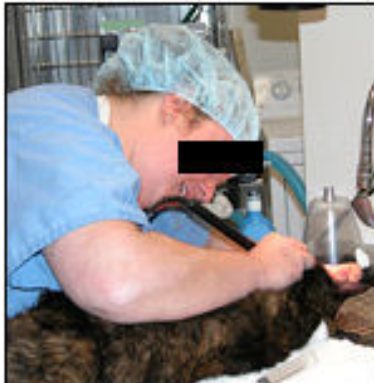
the due date to set up an appointment. She might say, “*Wendy, this is Susan calling for Dr. Smith at Smith Animal Hospital. We are worried that Ollie is past due for his exam and vaccines and is now unprotected. Will you please call our office at 720-555-5555?*” Personal phone calls can identify clients who moved or just need an extra nudge to make an appointment. The 2003 AAHA compliance study found 78% of clients surveyed wanted to be called about overdue vaccines and medication but only 52% actually received a call.

To even out your appointment book and have a steady stream of patients, mail reminders weekly rather than monthly. For example, on March 5 you would:

- Mail 1st reminders to pets whose services will be due between March 26 and 31
- Mail 2nd reminders to pets that are past due for the dates of February 19 to 25
- Make 3rd reminder phone calls to clients whose pets are past due for services from February 12 to 18

According to a *Veterinary Economics*’ study, companion animal practices typically receive a 60% response rate to 1st reminder postcards and 70% to phone calls.

Everyday Tasks Put Your Team at Safety Risk



During a consultation at a busy practice, I watched this technician perform nine dental cleanings. Other team members systematically prepared patients for anesthesia and recovered those waking up while she continually did one dental cleaning after another. The medical team’s organization was a model of efficiency, but the dental technician’s safety practices were frightening. She wasn’t wearing gloves, eye protection or a mask. Sloppy safety protocols can be a danger to both you and your patients. Flying bacteria from the scaling and polishing process can land in your eyes and mouth. Worse yet, ungloved hands going from one patient’s mouth to another’s could spread infection. Beyond gross, this poor hygiene is a medical and legal risk.

Dangerous exposures lurk in every corner of your hospital, from cleaning kennels to running in-house tests. A 2006 survey of 3,000 practitioners by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and American Veterinary Medical Association found poor practices when handling urine. Failing to wear gloves and safety gear exposes employees to zoonotic diseases. Dr. Larry Glickman, a Purdue University researcher, estimates 200 veterinary personnel are infected with Leptospirosis annually via hospital infection. Kennel employees have the greatest risk because of frequent contact with urine and less knowledge of zoonotic disease transmission, he says. Technicians and veterinary assistants are the next biggest risk group.

Become a safety vigilante. If you see a team member handling urine or performing professional dental cleanings without proper protection, say, “Let me bring you a pair of gloves.” Post signs in your lab reminding staff to “Wear Gloves When Handling Samples.” After all, the sick dog getting urinalysis as part of his workup doesn’t walk in the door with a sign around his neck that warns, “Caution, I may have Lepto.”

Build E-Slots Into Your Appointment Schedule to Reclaim Control of Your Day



It's Monday morning and six clients have called with sick pets and two walk-in emergencies just arrived. How will you see these urgent care patients and wellness appointments? Have receptionists reclaim control of your schedule rather than having it run you ragged. When clients with sick pets call, receptionists can evaluate the urgency in which they need to be seen.

Besides obvious emergencies of traumatic injuries, train front-office staff to prioritize patients with symptoms such as:

- Vomiting and/or diarrhea for more than 24 hours
- Ingestion or suspected swallowing of antifreeze, rat poison, human medications, household cleaners or other toxins
- Signs of extreme pain, such as whining or shaking
- Disorientation or bumping into objects
- Blood in urine or feces
- Straining or is unable to urinate (especially male cats)

Anything and everything can be a medical emergency—from a pet hit by a car to a simple broken toenail. If the situation is an “emergency” in the eyes of the client, then it is in ours too!

Keep an open block of urgent care or “e-slots” in your appointment schedule. The number of e-slots depends on your number doctors, staff and exam rooms. For a one- to two-doctor hospital, two or three 20-minute e-slots per day are usually sufficient. Try one urgent care slot mid-morning, another mid-afternoon and a third 60 to 90 minutes before closing. This accommodates clients who notice ill pets in the morning or after arriving home from work. If two or more doctors are seeing patients, stagger e-slots by one hour. For example, Doctor #1 might have an e-slot from 10:00-10:20 am, while Doctor #2 has an urgent care slot from 11:00-11:20 am. This prevents delays in the treatment area where technicians will need to potentially run lab tests and take x-rays.

Some practice owners worry that three open slots in the appointment schedule could cause a dip in revenue. Based on real-life experiences of our consulting clients who build e-slots into their schedules, this doesn't happen because urgent care slots always get filled—especially on Mondays, Fridays and Saturdays. If an urgent care slot is not filled within 60 to 90 minutes of the blocked time, the receptionist can open it to clients calling for wellness exams. Building time into your appointment schedule for sick pets will raise client satisfaction as well as revenue. Best of all, you and your staff will go home at closing time.

Taming the Internet Pharmacy Monster



A busy summer brings the joys of a full yet sometimes overloaded appointment schedule. You strive to see clients as quickly as possible and provide conveniences of TV, coffee and educational brochures when wait times incur. Wait time is an issue at many hospitals, and it gets worse the larger the practice, according to the National Commission on Veterinary Economic Issues (www.ncvei.org). In a five-doctor practice, a client typically waits 19 minutes during a busy part of the day before being escorted into an exam room. Then the same client waits nearly 9.5 minutes to check out. With a 20-minute wellness exam, the visit to the veterinarian takes a total of 49 minutes.

While clients wait in your lobby they watch Animal Planet. A PetMed Express commercial plays, asking “Tired of waiting for your pet’s prescriptions?” As a veterinary consultant, I often advise practice owners to turn off Animal Planet because animal abuse shows shock clients and commercials rob you of pharmacy income. Instead, play PetCare TV (www.petcaretv.com) that features wellness topics and emphasizes the expertise and professional services of veterinarians.

Why do clients choose Internet pharmacies over your veterinary practice? Veterinarians are quick to assume price but convenience is often the deciding factor for consumers. About 20 percent of pet owners use home delivery for products and 65 percent of PetMed Express sales are non-prescription items such as preventatives.

Clients understand the importance of protecting pets year-round from fleas, ticks and heartworms. While many fill one-time prescriptions for illnesses through your in-clinic pharmacy, they may shop Internet pharmacies for preventatives and long-term medications.

Try these strategies to take the nuisance out of filling prescriptions for your clients:

- ✓ Add a prescription refill request line.
- ✓ Offer the convenience of online ordering.
- ✓ Evaluate whether to charge a prescription writing fee.
- ✓ Educate clients about the dangers of Internet pharmacies.
- ✓ Learn the AVMA Position Statement on Internet Pharmacies.

[Click here](#) for the full article with each strategy explained in detail.

Why Can’t My Staff Get Along?



Staff shortages, long hours and dealing with life-and-death patient care decisions daily can sometimes cause personalities to boil over. If you’re struggling with flare-ups of cliques or gossip, consider ways to heal your team.

Help staff realize that they serve internal customers, not just clients and patients. Internal customers are people who are served by what you do. For example, if you’re the practice manager, you serve staff by ensuring payroll is completed accurately and timely. If you provide poor service and get paychecks out late, you’ll have an angry stampede chasing you! Treating each other with respect and demonstrating teamwork ensures a conflict-free work environment. So when you see a technician wrestling a fractious cat, pitch in with a “Let me help you” attitude and extra set of hands. The favor will be repaid tenfold.

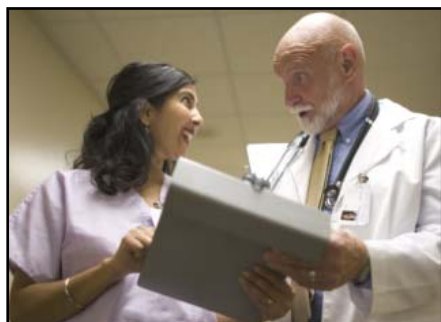


To remind staff members of teamwork's benefits, incorporate teambuilding exercises into your staff meetings. When counseling teams struggling with getting along, I often lead an exercise I call "Reverse Gossip." Choose one person to facilitate the exercise. Give staff members "Reverse Gossip" sheets. Ask each to write his or her name on a sheet. Tape a sheet onto each individual's back. Set a timer for 5 minutes, and tell staff to write something nice on the back of at least five co-workers. The sheet poses the question, "What does (staff member's name) do that contributes to our hospital's goal of high-quality medicine and client service?" When the leader says "Ready, Set, Go!" your team starts spreading compliments. After the timer sounds, each co-worker removes the sheet and reads praises co-workers wrote "behind their back." This reverse gossip exercise illustrates that positive, not negative, comments make us a more appreciative and productive team.

[Click here](#) for our reverse gossip sheet to use at your next staff meeting. Also try exercises from books such as *100 Training Games* (McGraw-Hill, 1993), *The Big Book of Team Building Games* (McGraw-Hill, 1998), *Team-Building Activities for Every Group* (Rec Room Publishing, 1999) and *Building Team Spirit: Activities for Inspiring and Energizing Teams* (McGraw-Hill, 1997).

Welcoming a New Doctor to Your Practice

By Wendy S. Myers, Communication Solutions for Veterinarians Inc., and Jennifer C. Olson, veterinary student at Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine



You're a new graduate, anxious to start a job where for the first time people will call you "Doctor." Years of studying and sleepless nights are finally over, or are they? Successfully integrating a new graduate or associate veterinarian into your practice can be equally stressful for the practice owner and employee. Get off to a great start with this advice from a leading consultant and veterinary student who will soon be the new doctor.

Have business cards printed before the new doctor's arrival. Imagine the pride your new associate will feel when he or she can hand clients a business card on the first day of work. Display business cards on the reception counter and in exam

rooms. The new doctor also should keep business cards in a lab coat pocket and give a card to every client he or she meets.

Describe your hospital protocols and drug inventory. Protocols explain your medical philosophies in areas such core and non-core vaccines, preanesthetic testing, heartworm testing and prevention for dogs and cats, intestinal parasite screening, pain management, euthanasia and more. Your associate can study protocols at home to get acquainted with your standards of care before stepping through the door as an employee. Also let your new doctor know which drugs you stock in your pharmacy. Go over commonly prescribed antibiotics, NSAIDs, steroids, preventatives and pain drugs. Review blood monitoring protocols for long-term prescriptions that treat conditions such as seizures, arthritis, heart disease, allergies, hyperthyroidism and hypothyroidism.

Make the first day special. Place flowers on the reception counter with a welcome card. The bouquet will have clients asking about who received such beautiful flowers, and your associate will beam with pride. When the new associate arrives, the practice owner should give the doctor a tour of the hospital, stopping to introduce each team member and explain their role. Make sure staff members wear

nametags because your new doctor will have a lot of names to learn. The practice owner should treat the doctor to lunch the first day. Prioritize your appointment and surgery schedule so a lunch break happens rather than having the new associate work through lunch and have a growling stomach during afternoon exams.

Avoid the scavenger hunt for equipment and supplies. “Where’s the otoscope?” the new doctor asks, leaving a client waiting in the exam room. Don’t send the new doctor on a wild goose chase looking for commonly used equipment and medical supplies. As part of orientation, have a technician show the new doctor where items are kept and who to ask about reordering when supplies get low.

When you integrate a new doctor with these welcoming strategies, you’ll build the foundation for a strong, lasting relationship. The “baptism by fire” approach of orientating a new doctor only leaves the practice burned. Practice the Golden Rule and treat your new associate as you would have wanted to be treated on your first day as a veterinarian. Years of loyalty from your associate veterinarian will be your reward.

Special thanks to our co-author:



Jennifer C. Olson completed a practice-management externship at Communication Solutions for Veterinarians in the summer of 2007. She is a veterinary student at Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, graduating in 2009. Her passion for veterinary medicine runs in the family as she is the fourth generation veterinarian, following her father, grandmother, grandfather and great-grandfather. She studied microbiology at the University of California at Davis and graduated with highest academic honors in 2005. Jennifer has an interest in small animal medicine and surgery. She happily shares her first-hand experiences of living with a FIV positive cat, Samson, with clients. You can reach her at jco32@cornell.edu.

Amplify Your Average Charge Per Transaction



The sight of school buses each fall can trigger panic attacks in some veterinarians. Families focused on back-to-school purchases often place lower priorities on veterinary care. As a result, your average charge per transaction (ACT) may temporarily dip.

Get your team involved in getting the front door swinging. Call clients with pets that are overdue for exams and vaccines. During a staff meeting, brainstorm ways to improve compliance and ensure what gets recommended gets scheduled at checkout. Try these strategies to bolster your ACT:

Include an intestinal parasite screen with every wellness exam. A recent study found 83% of dog owners are unaware their pets’ waste can cause parasite infections in humans. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (www.cdc.gov) reports 10,000 cases of roundworm infection annually. You can protect pets and families with intestinal parasite screens, year-round preventatives and strategic deworming. For Companion Animal Parasite Council guidelines, visit www.capcvet.org.

Use photos to make recommendations more powerful. When you spot dental disease, take a photo with your digital or Polaroid camera. Have a technician prepare a treatment plan (formerly called an estimate) for a professional dental cleaning. Staple the photo of disgusting teeth to the treatment plan. If the client fails to schedule the procedure at checkout, she has visual proof to share with family members at home.

Perform an annual heartworm test. The American Heartworm Society (www.heartwormsociety.org) recommends an annual heartworm test for dogs and periodic testing in cats. Studies found feline heartworms were present in 10% of cats, which is higher when compared to feline leukemia virus at 5% and FIV at 6%. Tell cat-owning clients, “Our clinic follows the latest guidelines from the American Heartworm Society. We test cats before beginning preventatives and also cats test with any symptoms.” If a client declines a heartworm test, note it in the medical record or have them sign a waiver to stress the seriousness of their decision.

Send clients home with at least one dental product. Research shows only 2% of pet owners brush their pets’ teeth. While brushing is best, offer clients alternatives if you get pushback. Suggest drinking water additives, dental diets, dental chews, rinses or gels.

Use a travel sheet to avoid missed charges. Forgetting a \$12 nail trim or \$21 ear cytology quickly adds up. Losing \$200 per day could equal \$60,000 in missing revenue annually. Use a travel sheet and circle items as services are performed. The travel sheet follows the patient from the exam room into the treatment area, where blood draws and other diagnostics might be completed. Circling as you go ensures nothing gets forgotten. For travel sheets and hospital forms, order *The Veterinary Practice Management Resource Book & CD*. [Click here](#) for details.

Use callbacks to recapture missed rechecks



When our 21-year-old cat was recently diagnosed and treated for a urinary tract infection, our veterinarian said he’d like to see Ollie again in two weeks. I’m usually an A+ client but forgot to schedule Ollie’s medical progress exam at checkout. I called two weeks later to make the appointment. Lyndsey at The Cat Specialist said, “I’m glad you called because you’re on our list to contact tomorrow.” Between the two of us, Ollie got the needed follow-up care. But how often do staff at most practices call when a client forgets?

With today’s economy, following up on missed rechecks is good business and good patient care. By recapturing unscheduled medical progress exams, you’ll recover revenue opportunities and also save clients money by making sure pets’ problems are resolved. A missed recheck could mean the problem gets worse ~ and more expensive ~ to diagnose and treat.

When checking out clients for sick patient visits, receptionists should confirm when the doctor needs to see the pet next. Add a checklist with common intervals for medical progress exams to your travel sheet such as:

When do we need to see this patient next?

- 3-5 days
- 7 days
- 10-14 days
- Other _____
- Regular reminder cycle

For a sample outpatient travel sheet, order *The Veterinary Practice Management Resource Book & CD* by [clicking here](#) or call 720-344-2347.

Scheduling the next visit at checkout is best, but if the client doesn't have her calendar or needs to check with family members first, enter a callback in your veterinary software. Contact the client within one week to schedule the needed medical appointment.

This courtesy reminder call is not telemarketing. You're being a patient advocate and ensuring pets get needed follow-up care. When the receptionist calls, she says to the client: "Mrs. Smith, did you have an opportunity to check your calendar? The doctor needs to see your dog for a medical progress exam next week. Ear infections can be painful and develop into a serious condition unless treated and rechecked to make sure the infection has cleared. When would be a convenient time for you and Jake to schedule his medical progress exam? We can see Jake on Thursday at 4 pm or Friday at 10:30 am. Which best fits your schedule?"

You can train your entire veterinary team with *How to Conduct Effective Reminder Calls & Callbacks*. The book and 30-minute audio seminar offers tips on designing reminder cycles, creating automated computer codes to generate callbacks and reminders, recapturing rechecks, setting up recommended services codes, using a travel sheet and more. *How to Conduct Effective Reminder Calls & Callbacks* is \$139.95 for the book and audio seminar. [Click here](#) to go to our book page where you can read a sample chapter, listen to a seminar segment and place your order.

Follow-up calls improve scheduling of medical progress exams, according to the AAHA compliance study. The pet-owner survey revealed that of those who did not return for a recheck as directed by veterinarians, 38 percent would have done so if they received a follow-up call.

Is Business Slow? Call Your Clients

As you pour over monthly financials, you may see impacts of the economy. Act now to reverse declining visits and lower transactions. Here are strategies to recession-proof your veterinary practice:

Call clients whose pets are overdue for services. Run a report in your veterinary software to identify patients overdue for wellness services within the last 30 to 60 days. Because these clients have already overlooked a postcard or e-mail, call on weekdays between 5 to 7 pm or Saturdays from 9 to 11 am, when you're most likely to reach clients at home. Your team might say, "This is Wendy calling for the doctors at Myers Veterinary Hospital. Max is overdue for his wellness exam, vaccinations and heartworm and intestinal parasite tests, and we're worried about his health. When is a convenient time for you and Max to come in for an appointment this week? The doctor can see you at 6 pm on Thursday or 9 am on Saturday. Which is more convenient for you?"

Break down the cost per day of preventatives. Explain manufacturers' rebates or free doses if clients buy a year's supply of preventatives. Describe the cost per day to show the economic value of year-round protection. "When you buy a 12-month supply of (product name), you can protect your dog from heartworms and intestinal parasites for just XX cents per day."

Help clients understand the savings of prevention compared to the cost of treatment with a bulletin board in the lobby. Post these figures:

- Number of heartworm positive dogs diagnosed in our hospital last year
- Cost to diagnose and treat heartworm disease in a 50-pound dog
- Cost of 12 months of heartworm and intestinal parasite preventatives for a 50-pound dog

In many practices, heartworm diagnosis and treatment can top \$600 to \$1,000 compared to \$100 to protect canine patients with a year's supply of preventatives. You can use this same bulletin board theme

to promote flea and intestinal parasite control. Just change the example from heartworms to fleas or intestinal parasites.



Schedule medical progress exams at checkout. Clients may skip a follow-up visit to save a few dollars. But without reassessment by a doctor, the pet's medical problem may worsen and actually become more costly to treat. To increase compliance for medical progress exams, avoid calling them "rechecks," which sounds optional and unimportant.

Hang wall calendars or have computers in exam rooms so doctors can point to a specific date when follow-up care is needed. For example, the doctor might say, "I need to see your dog again on (date). Ear infections can be painful and develop into a serious condition unless treated and rechecked to make sure the infection has cleared. The receptionist will schedule an appointment for you and Jake for his medical progress exam on (date)."

Schedule the medical progress exam at checkout when compliance is highest. If the client does not schedule the follow-up exam, enter a callback. In one week, a team member would call the client and say, "Mrs. Smith, did you have an opportunity to check your calendar? The doctor needs to see your dog for a medical progress exam next week. When would be a convenient time for you and Jake to schedule his medical progress exam? We can see Jake on Thursday at 4 pm or Friday at 10:30 am. Which best fits your schedule?"

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