

Problem Free Pets: A New Model for Companion Animal Veterinary Care

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Received: July 08, 2020

Published: August 25, 2020

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Abstract

The current model of companion animal veterinary practice tends to be reactive, often waiting for animals to become ill before pet owners seek veterinary care. By helping to establish appropriate pet owner expectations regarding the care of their animals, veterinary teams can be more proactive and focus on prevention, wellness, and better control of chronic diseases.

Keywords: *Animal Veterinary Care; Pet; Veterinary Practice*

The model for companion animal veterinary practice has changed little in the last several decades, despite profound changes in the ability of veterinarians to deliver advanced care, and the sophistication of pet owners in their ability to comprehend and appreciate such directives. Opportunities exist for veterinarians to take a much more proactive role in the healthcare of pets, keeping them healthy and improving not only their longevity, but their quality of life as well.

All too often, pet owners have an unrealistic view of what should be involved in the care of a pet. If they believe that all their pet requires is the occasional veterinary visit, vaccines and parasite control, and otherwise only contact veterinary teams when they notice clinical problems, they are not receiving the most value they could from the veterinary experience. Pet owners appreciate veterinary leadership in preferred approaches to keep pets healthy and well and to prevent issues rather than having to address them once they become problematic.

Assistance in the acquisition phase

Veterinary staff are typically well educated and dedicated to animal health, but they often begin to engage clients late in the process, after they have already acquired a pet. Opportunities exist for

veterinary teams to play an important role, earlier in the process, even during the acquisition phase. Not only is this the best time to do pre-purchase evaluations, but also to help would-be pet owners select a pet that is most appropriate for their circumstances. This would help pet owners select a pet that matches their expectations and such pairing would likely reduce the probability of relinquishment and dissatisfaction with pet ownership.

Many pet owners acquire a pet on impulse, and may not have had the opportunity to learn about the anticipated cost of care, and the lifelong needs of pets. This can be a time to discuss not only the benefits of pet ownership, the attributes of specific purebreds, hybrids and mixed breeds, but anticipated health care needs on a pet-specific basis, lifelong anticipated costs of care, and how to address problems at the very earliest stages, when typically there are the most opportunities for management.

Prevention

When it comes to prevention and wellness, veterinary practices often do an excellent job, but there is often a disconnect between the expectations of veterinarians and pet owners. In most veterinary hospitals, the notion of prevention is exemplified by vaccination and parasite control. These are the cornerstone of public

health, but for most pet owners, there are opportunities for veterinarians to do so much more.

When pet owners consider the topics of prevention and wellness, they often think about nutrition, exercise and general healthy living. These are indeed important, but veterinary interventions that are going to have the most impact on a pet's health over a lifetime provide even more opportunities to consider. Regarding pet relinquishment to animal shelters, it is generally appreciated that behavior problems are more commonly implicated in the decision than all medical conditions combined. So, behavior counseling would appear to be an important aspect of veterinary services but often doesn't receive the same attention as medical conditions. That being said, the majority of pets also have evidence of periodontal disease by the time they are young adults, so opportunities exist to do a better job with oral care. Osteoarthritis is one of the most common causes of chronic pain, so also deserves appropriate attention.

As part of the pre-purchase program, veterinary teams can also help pet owners have a better chance of adopting a problem-free pet by instructing them on the questions that should be posed to sellers, heritable conditions and traits to be considered and how to use family history (genetic testing, health registries/schemes, questionnaires) to maximize the chances of adopting pets with less risk of specific health problems.

Early detection

Veterinary practices often offer consistent screening for parasites, but in general most other forms of early detection are not used until pets start to experience health problems. Unfortunately, that often misses the subclinical phases of many disorders when disease processes are happening, but the pet appears outwardly healthy. So, when it comes to many chronic diseases (diabetes mellitus, heart disease, kidney disease, liver disease, etc.), the process may have actually been proceeding for months or years before the veterinary team becomes aware. There are better opportunities to intervene if the situation is addressed in a pre-clinical stage, when typically there are the most options for successful management.

An early detection option that has a lot of promise for veterinary teams is genetic (DNA) testing. While such testing can be done at any age, it has the most utility when done in young pets, typically around 12 weeks of age (after initial clinical examina-

tions, the onset of vaccination and parasite control protocols, and after pet health insurance is in effect, if that is an option).

When it comes to DNA testing, it is important for the veterinary team to employ this in the correct context - as a health screen rather than a disease screen. DNA testing occasionally has a role as a diagnostic test, but it has the most utility as a means of determining potential risk factors so as to keep pets healthy. Like all forms of early detection, it is most important that veterinary teams properly portray where these tests provide value and that is to alert veterinary team members and pet owners about potential risk factors and address them before they cause problems.

DNA tests are a small piece of the lifelong care puzzle, but they are important because they are some of the earliest screening tests that can be done. While there are now hundreds of genetic variants that have been documented and can be screened, it is important to keep things in perspective because while it is extremely helpful to determine pets at genetic risk for conditions such as von Willebrand disease, progressive retinal atrophy, cystinuria and others, the vast majority of health care issues that commonly affect animals (e.g. hip dysplasia, allergies, diabetes mellitus, feline lower urinary tract disease, etc.) tend to be multifactorial and are not only influenced by multiple genes, but by multiple environmental factors as well.

Some aspects of early detection are predictable based on breed and other risk factors, and so pet-specific screening can be carried out according to evidence-based standards of care. DNA tests may also be able to narrow down a subset of animals that should have phenotypic screening for problems such as glaucoma, cardiomyopathy, degenerative myelopathy and many other conditions. For other situations, in which there may be risk factors evident in the larger population, it would be sensible to establish appropriate screening procedures for things like hip dysplasia and other orthopedic problems, titers to help predict when re-vaccination is indicated, and assessment for problems that may pose a threat in the local environment (e.g. heartworm, tick-related disorders, leishmaniasis, spirocercosis, etc.).

To remain proactive regarding potential chronic problems, veterinary teams should consider optimal times for running baseline testing (hemograms, biochemical profiles, thyroid assessment, imaging etc.) so there is a mechanism in place for detecting trends and

identifying patients that warrant intervention early. If this is done routinely and periodically, it might also be possible to reconsider evidence-based evaluations done on a pre-anesthetic or senior basis.

Sensible management

The overall level of care typically available from veterinary hospitals is good, and yet there are opportunities to provide an enhanced level of care by standardizing our approach to medicine, and removing bias from our clinical judgements. This is becoming easier to accomplish as many veterinary associations and specialty organizations have created guidelines. These guidelines are not meant to replace clinical judgement, but to provide an evidence-based platform for assessing what works best, and what doesn't. Such guidelines are just that - guidelines - but individual veterinary hospitals can turn these into standards of care by customizing them to the needs of the specific client and region.

Another important way to promote the idea of problem free pets is to contemplate treatment with specific goals in mind, and with the intention of improving outcomes while also enhancing quality of life. For many chronic conditions, such treatment decisions impact a continuum of care and it might cause teams to reconsider achieving short-term gains in favor of better long-term outcomes. So, a medication that might be chosen because it is inexpensive and works quickly may be reconsidered in light of potential long-term side effects and impact on quality of life. The routine use of antibiotics may be reconsidered in light of the potential effect on antimicrobial resistance.

Opportunities for engagement

It is now possible to engage clients, not on a transactional basis of visit to visit, but with a lifelong strategy for how to care for animals over a healthy lifespan in which they are basically well, sometimes referred to as healthspan. This is a new approach which is variably referred to as pet-specific care, lifelong care, or personalized medicine. It is not for everyone, but there is a subset of pet owners who consider their pets like family, they are used to this kind of approach from their own medical teams, and they embrace such opportunities to include their pets.

Conclusion

We should anticipate that such clients will also be receptive to a variety of other ways for us to interact with them on a more proac-

tive basis, such as telehealth, and remote monitoring. It will also be important to curate resources used for client education, so that pet owners are receiving consistent messaging about the care of their pets. In this way, we can provide services that truly help clients raise problem free pets [1-3].

Acknowledgement

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