VET TALK: Trends in Communication

04/15/2015

Patient: Bart

Obesity Treatment Plan:
- Diet: Hill’s Prescription Diet® Metabolic + Mobility 1 cup twice a day.
- Exercise: 15-20 minutes/day of walking, chasing Frisbee
- Medication: None

Athena Veterinary Hospital
A Chat with Pachtinger:
Of Culture, Trends, Empowerment & Understanding

IN this interview, Dr. Garrett Pachtinger provides some tips and insight into how to motivate both practice team members and clients to recognize the need for and value of preventive care—and act to provide preventive care for pets.

On the human side, preventive medicine is a unique medical specialty recognized by the American Board of Medical Specialties. In veterinary medicine, the first Department of Veterinary Preventive Medicine was established in 1934 at the Ohio State University, for the purposes of preventing and controlling globally important diseases of food animals and humans. The importance of this was further cemented in 2011, when AAHA published preventive health care recommendations. The same principles can be applied to companion animal medicine with the ultimate goal of enabling pet owners to better understand the value of preventive veterinary care and allow pets to live longer, healthier lives.

To promote the importance of preventive medicine within practice, it is first important to recognize pets are living longer as a result of advancements in veterinary care and the fact that previously expensive or unavailable diagnostics (ie, point of care blood analysis, digital x-rays, ultrasound, MRI, etc) are now both more affordable and accessible.

Once the veterinary team understands the demands of medicine are changing, the practice can focus on:

1 Marketing to the veterinary team: essentially emphasizing the importance of preventive medicine. If the team “buys-in,” they are better able to be advocates within your practice when conversing with clients. The busy veterinarian often struggles with effective communication with the client, constantly being pulled in different directions. The ability of other team members to assist with communication with the client is of ever-increasing value to the veterinary practice.

2 Marketing to current and new clients: to help them understand the value of preventive care. This can be done through social media, email campaigns, phone conversations, and even in-person/in-hospital conversations.

3 Providing resources for pet owners: to reinforce preventive medicine and an understanding of disease. With the ever-growing resource of “Dr. Google,” it is important to provide pet owners with a variety of trusted resources such as client handouts and respected veterinary websites. With this knowledge they can educate themselves about preventive care and appropriate medical care.
Medical skills are hard science and so arguably easier to address in training. What sorts of events/resources can increase communication skills?

Several tools can be used in practice to promote education, and empowerment of the staff and clients—and ultimately client compliance.

1. **Training and education of ALL staff** members to promote the practice philosophy and help understand the “why.” An educational tool known as 55OPM (Five Minutes for Five Steps of Preventive Medicine) is an educational tool that can be used to help ensure discussion occurs with each and every client.

2. Once a foundation of education and communication tools is built, **role-play** is an important step to reinforce this knowledge and develop a comfort level with the information. Role-play scenarios among the staff create a sense of positivity and provide the staff with a higher level of confidence when speaking to clients about the information.

3. **After role-play time has been provided,** the next step is to allow the staff the opportunity to **interact with clients.** Initially, supervision or a tag-team approach with a more comfortable staff member may be needed in order to provide support and feedback.

4. **Finally, encouraging the staff to use these tools independently** provides both the staff member with a sense of empowerment and independence and also the client with a voice of knowledge, compassion, and accurate information to ultimately convey a better sense of patient care.

In regard to obesity specifically, how do staff address the topic in face of clients who are themselves obese?

Regardless of the owner’s health status, any client may be sensitive about their pet’s weight, and it is important to discuss these concerns in a nonjudgmental manner.

The first step in a healthy dialogue is to promote optimism and empowerment and to create the perception of value if the recommended weight loss is achieved. The health care community recognizes that numerous disease processes are caused or exacerbated by obesity including but not limited to diabetes, cardiac disease, and orthopedic disease. We also must:

- **Listen** to our clients, without interruption or judgment
- **Understand** that a client’s reluctance to follow recommendations may not represent defiance of the veterinarian but rather a lack of information or even an emotional issue that we must address.
- **Focus on the positive end results.** Help clients to appreciate what can be achieved by providing examples of previous positive outcomes in your practice.

Are new-age owners more open to preventive medicine for their pets than people were in the past?

The advent of newer, more cost-efficient diagnostics in both human and veterinary medicine has brought an ever-increasing emphasis on preventing rather than treating disease. Also, with an aging population of people and pets and growing rates of obesity and other chronic diseases, owners expect better health care and are focused on prevention. Newer generations are bombarded with information about health care initiatives, vitamins, potions, and powders.

New-age owners understand that prevention is cheaper than treatment and if nothing else, cheaper is better. Finally, there has also been a movement toward “pets are family” rather than a commodity, and pet parents have an emotional attachment that leads to the desire for optimum care for their pets.

**Resources**
- [https://www.aaha.org/professional/resources/preventive_healthcare.aspx#gsc.tab=0](https://www.aaha.org/professional/resources/preventive_healthcare.aspx#gsc.tab=0)

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Within the veterinary profession it is widely recognized that chronic conditions such as obesity and joint disease affect our pets, patients, staff, and even ourselves. Sixty-eight percent of U.S. adults are overweight or obese.¹ Notable diseases linked to or exacerbated by excess weight include heart disease, cancer, chronic lower respiratory diseases, and stroke (cerebrovascular diseases).

Now I have your attention. You have put down that candy bar you call “lunch” as you continue to read these proceedings between your 25th and 26th appointments of the day. The question remains, what about our pets and patients?

In a recent British Small Animal Veterinary Congress abstract presented in 2014, it was documented that obesity is a growing concern in the veterinary profession.² Body condition scores (BCS) were tracked in both the feline and canine population. Between July 2008 and June 2009, over 23,000 cats and dogs were weighed and condition scored. Between July 2012 and June 2013, almost 29,000 dogs and cats were weighed and measured. The prevalence of overweight and obesity (BCS > 3, scale 1‒5) in the population increased from 23.4% in the first period (2008–2009) to 23.55% in the later study period.

Another study showed that when evaluating 3,884 randomly selected dogs from a population of 148,741 dogs attending 93 clinics from September 1, 2009 to March 31, 2013, 2,945 (75.8%) dogs had at least one disorder diagnosed, with some of the most prevalent disorders including joint disease and obesity.³
These are startling facts that should prompt a “call to action” within your practice and within the veterinary community. The good news is that we have new and better tools to not only treat, but prevent chronic disease in our veterinary patients. A common assumption among new graduates is that these new tools are fancy things that cost lots of money. I am not referring to a new ultrasound machine, blood analyzer, MRI, or any other new or shiny medical toy. The most important tools are your time, knowledge, education, and communication skills.

**Why Do We Care?**

**Why Should Our Clients Care?**

Does discussing preventative health measures at the time of a new puppy or kitten examination seem boring and unwarranted? Maybe…but consider this: Studies investigating overweight dogs and cats have identified many of the same health problems observed in overweight or obese humans. Examples of disease processes include dental disease, dermatologic diseases, lower urinary tract problems, diabetes, pancreatitis, cruciate ligament rupture (dogs), hypothyroidism, hyperadrenocorticism, osteoarthritis, hypertension, and altered kidney function.¹

Even more concerning, these patients often develop not one, but multiple and related disease processes. For example, obesity and joint disease are often found concurrently. In a study that looked at feline joint disease, 15% of cats with joint disease were reported to be obese.² Let’s be honest—is there not a better poster-child for a cruciate rupture than the overweight large breed dog with hip osteoarthritis that presents for an acute hindlimb lameness?

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**Bottom line: if you don’t communicate effectively with the owner, then do not get upset when the “expert” at the pet store recommends that they change their diet or joint supplement.**

Your passion is clear. The dilemma we face on a daily basis is how to harness our passion for health and focus it on our clients. To do this, we must look at how we arrived at the point of disease, obesity, joint disease, and other chronic diseases that are plaguing our patients:

1. As a profession, do we not have enough time to cover wellness and client communication in the face of the ever-increasing amount of medical knowledge?

2. Do you feel stressed and encouraged to see more cases in a shorter period of time, limited to the time in the examination room to reinforce wellness and discuss chronic disease?

3. Do you feel frustrated when you don’t have time to communicate effectively, but do your best, only to have the client elect to follow someone else’s advice? Case in point: as a veterinarian, does it bother you when a client elects to make health decisions influenced by people other than veterinary professionals, such as a nutritional decision guided by a pet store employee?
Yes, I know it does. Bottom line: if you don’t communicate effectively with the owner, then do not get upset when the “expert” at the pet store recommends that they change their diet or joint supplement.

**Realities Of Veterinary Medicine We Must Hold True**

1. Every pet owner that walks into the hospital is a candidate for preventive medicine counseling.

2. As our medicine, diagnostics, and therapeutics improve, we are seeing older patients and chronic disease is becoming a more important part of our veterinary practices.

Now that we have discussed the dilemmas we face in veterinary medicine, including the growing number of chronic diseases, the importance of effective communication in the face of less time with the client, the ever-growing amount of medical information needed to practice medicine, and the increasing demand for more appointments and financial production, how is the busy veterinary professional expected to balance all of these concerns?

It is not solely up to the veterinarian to balance all of these aspects of veterinary medicine. Your veterinary team can help your patients and clients, too! A good practice has a network and support system, rather than relying on the veterinarian alone to promote excellent health and client communication.

In many practices the technician or receptionist spends more time with the client than the veterinarian does. This is an opportunity for the support staff to effectively communicate with the pet owner. When your support staff is fully invested in the practice, core values, and marketing plan, the quality and availability of services increase and the client experience is improved within the practice.

Finally, we must continue to remember why we are doing what we do, practicing medicine, saving lives, and treating family members. Our veterinary support staff is doing the same and we must continue to educate them to allow continued job satisfaction, motivation, and improved service for the clients and patients. Their enthusiasm will be reflected in the quality of their work and increase the number of satisfied clients.

Ways to promote this enthusiasm and knowledge include regular staff training programs, periodic in-house training events, and job delegation to allow your staff to be empowered within your practice.

**Conclusion**

The approach in our practices should be to EMPOWER our staff and, in turn, the clients—with an emphasis on a working partnership and shared problem-solving. Promoting a hospital-wide culture that reinforces disease preven-
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References

Suggested Reading
German AJ. The growing problem of obesity in dogs and cats. J Nutr 2006;136(7 Suppl):1940S–1946S.