

# Pain and the Fearful Client

Veterinarians and technicians can work in tandem to help reluctant clients accept short-term pain for long-term gain.

by Carolyn Shadle

*"She's been in so much pain already. Make it so it doesn't hurt any more."*

*"I don't care if it helps, she's crying!"*

*"That needle is huge! Don't you have some kind of pain-killer so he won't feel it?"*

**Question:** How can veterinarians persuade fearful clients to accept pain when it is an unavoidable consequence of treatment?

**Answer:** Team up with your technicians to respond with respect, compassion, education, and reassurance.

Long gone are the days when a veterinary professional — veterinarian or certified technician — could stand on position alone. With the human health system encouraging clients to take responsibility for their own health, clients are more educated and empowered than ever to challenge doctors' opinions. For many clients, and especially those below the age of 40, "Because I said so" is worse than no answer at all: It's a joke.

Today, it's the person, not the position, that carries authority. Clients, by and large, judge a veterinary professional's credibility on two things: competence and caring. In an environment increasingly driven by consumer choice, persuasion has replaced education as veterinary professionals strive to lead clients, rather than direct them, to the best medical decision for their pets.

While clients certainly trust veterinarians to give expert medical advice, they often feel more comfortable discussing their doubts and fears with technicians. For this reason, the veterinarian-technician team approach to working through client objections makes most sense.

Here's an example of how veterinarians and registered technicians can work together to help clients make the best choice for their pet's care:

The veterinarian has just recommended surgery to repair a ruptured cranial cruciate ligament. The client agrees, but after the veterinarian leaves the room, turns to the technician with a frown.

*Will that hurt?*

*It will benefit Buddy over the long term, but yes, the recovery period is painful.*

*I've read about that, and my concern is that the recovery period will be more painful than what she's feeling now. I don't want to put her through that.*

I can understand that. But with a ruptured ACL, if you don't repair it, it often leads to osteoarthritis and joint inflammation, which can be very painful.

Repairing it will reduce the pain over the long run and give Buddy a better quality of life overall.

*What are you going to do to manage that pain during recovery?*

We have pain medications and rehab; both decrease the pain.

*Won't the rehab hurt?*

The rehab is not painful, it's a matter of retraining the muscles. There can be discomfort, but less than there is now.

*If I don't have this surgery what will happen?*

It would be best to talk to Dr. Burtin to answer that question. Let me go get her.

Dr. Burtin: I understand you have some questions about Buddy's outlook if you decide against surgery. Here's a snapshot: The joint will get more and more destabilized, which will cause more discomfort, and you'll have to give her more medications.

After several years, the joint becomes more stable, but there is less range of motion, and it's a very painful process. Also, it's very common for other joints in the legs, the hips, to become arthritic due to abnormal wear and tear.

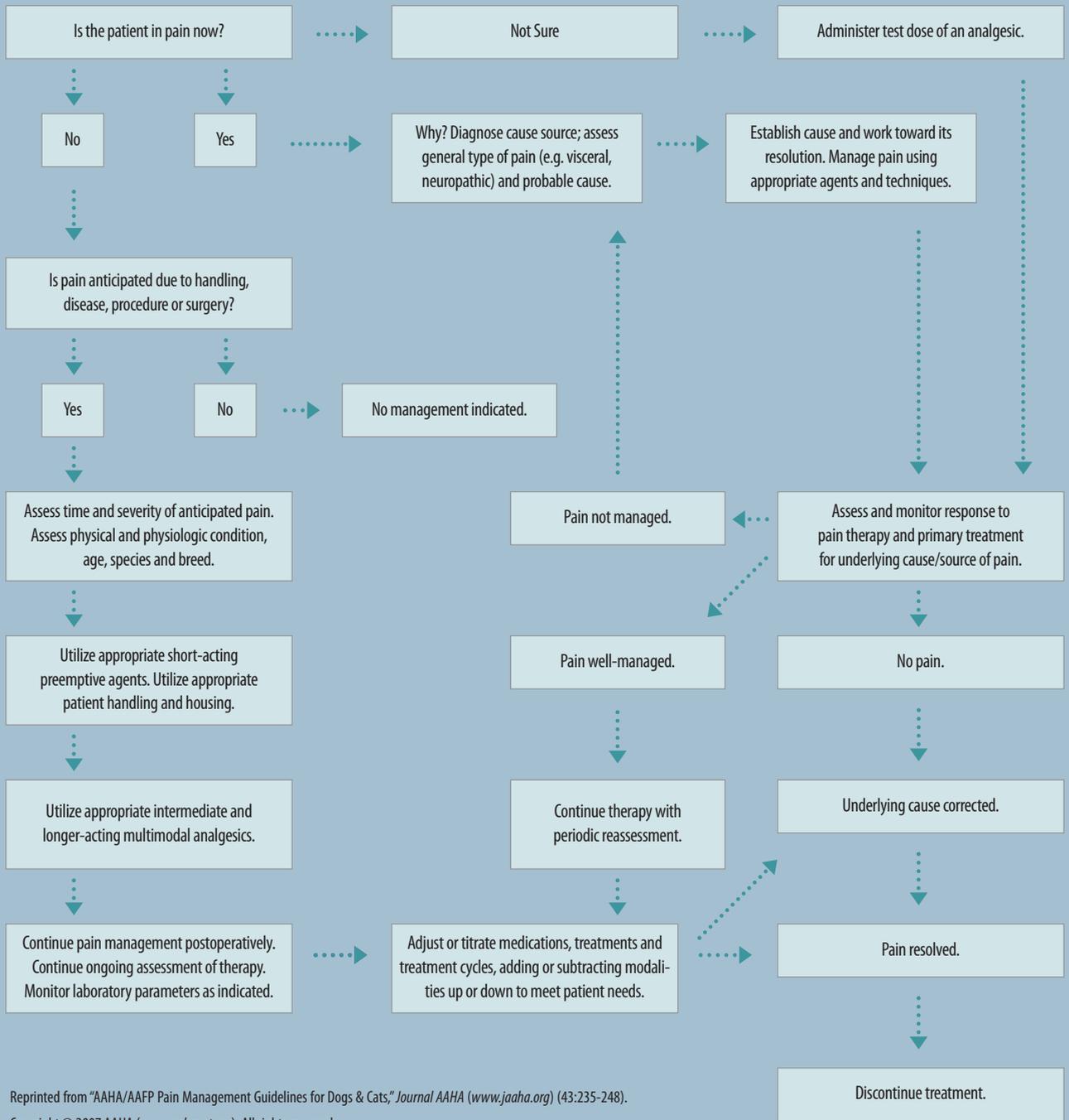
*OK then, it seems pretty obvious to me that the short-term pain is a decent trade-off. My concern now is what are you going to do to control the pain...*

Dr. Burtin: This is the best decision you could make for Buddy.

At this point, the veterinarian may leave the room to allow the technician to complete the discussion and set the appointment.

Through empathy and even-handed, respectful answers to the client's questions, the technician and veterinarian worked together to help the client come to a "yes" decision on a necessary surgery for her pet. ■

# Pain management algorithm to aid in identification, prevention, and management



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