



Overcoming Dentaphobia

How do you persuade your clients to embrace pet dental care?

by John L. Meyer, PhD, and Carolyn C. Shadle, PhD

WHEN PATTI MILLER, OF EASTON, MD., told us that her cat had two teeth extracted, we asked her why. “Oh, the cat’s mouth looked terrible. The teeth were green and her breath smelled awful.”

“Had you had the cat’s teeth cleaned in the past?” we asked.

“Oh, no. That’s too pricey, and there did not appear to be any problem.”

You’ve heard this story many times. It appears that when veterinarians recommend a full dental check-up or cleaning, most clients don’t understand the importance.

Natasha Wilks, BVSc, of High Performance Vets, in Brisbane, Australia, says, “Unfortunately, clients hear what they want to hear unless you are very specific and direct in your communication. The language you use is very important, as is the way it is delivered. Use the word ‘need’ or ‘must.’ Convey certainty with your voice.”



Dental care is relatively new

A common view used to run something like this: “Look, my family has had dogs and cats for the last 100 years without dental care. We had good veterinary care for them. But dental care? We did very well without it.”

It’s probably true that your clients’ parents maintained pets with no dental care. Dentistry became a focal point of veterinary medicine only in the ’70s and ’80s. The American Veterinary Dental Society (AVDS),

which formed in 1976, grew rapidly and formed The Academy of Veterinary Dentistry in 1987. In 1988, the American Veterinary Dental College (AVDC) was established.

It’s worth reminding clients that medicine—human and animal—has made a lot of progress, and it’s only been in the last few decades that a connection has been established between dental health and overall well-being.

Why dental care?

Curt Coffman, DVM, president of the Academy of Veterinary Dentistry, reported at last year's Western Veterinary Conference on the serious negative health implications for a pet's internal organ system stemming from bacteria in the mouth moving into the bloodstream. This can result in pathologies in the heart, kidney and liver—and possibly premature death.

Think about it, and it's easy to understand the accumulation of tartar and bacteria within the moist, dark, nutrient-rich mouth.

To prevent such problems, veterinarians advise clients to brush their pet's teeth, feed them healthy food and give them opportunities for chewing. But, as with humans, these practices don't replace a professional exam and cleaning, done under anesthesia.

Is it worth the cost?

Your clients may say, "But it's costly, and I don't have that kind of money. I'll take my chances."

Yes, like all medical services, it can be considered "pricey." Apryl Steele, DVM and owner of Tender Touch Animal Hospital, in Denver, says it can run between \$350 and \$450, including preoperative blood tests, a dental cleaning, polish, fluoride treatment, dental radiographs, IV catheter, EKG and pulse oximeter, as well as general anesthesia and full monitoring.

Steele adds, "There are much cheaper dental cleanings; however, in my opinion, you should either do it right or not do it at all."

Mark Motichka, DVM and owner of the Parker Center Animal Clinic, in Parker, Colo., echoes her sentiments. "When people ask, I will always tell them that the cost for dental care is not cheap—not to do it well. However, when you balance the cost of dental care with the improvement in health, comfort and well-being of their pets, it is a bargain."

A proper exam, under anesthesia, allows the use of sharp, delicate curettes and ultrasonic scaling equipment. Practitioners can get below the gumline and safely probe the subgingival issues. They can also take dental radiographs and biopsies of lesions. If necessary, practitioners

can perform extractions. Finally, they can polish the teeth, which is an important step in decreasing the retention of plaque and calculus. The exam will reveal what cannot be seen otherwise.

Tony Woodward, DVM, DAVDC, in Colorado Springs, Colo., tells the story of a German shepherd with an abscessed tooth that had eaten away a part of the dog's jaw the size of two grapes. "This I could only see on the X-ray."

Woodward went on to use this story to underscore how much more active and healthy this dog was following the dental procedure—in contrast to the "old dog" symptoms the dog had been showing before.

Fear of anesthesia

Another pet owner, Madeline Miller, of Buffalo, N.Y., told us that her veterinarian had recommended a teeth cleaning and exam for her cat, Missy. Miller replied that she would think about it. Then she consulted her friends, who told her that not only is such work expensive, but also that it involves an uncomfortable procedure that requires anesthesia. Her website search led her to a dental service that did not require anesthesia and would be cheaper. The site read:

"Professional Outpatient Preventive Dentistry (POPD) utilizes a type of gentle proprietary behavioral management to allow your pet to have a complete visual dental examination and preventive cleaning of all tooth surfaces without the use of a general anesthesia."

While acknowledging that such services offering reduced prices are available, Steele points out two major problems resulting from teeth cleaning without anesthesia: Radiographs cannot be obtained and effective polishing is rarely achieved.

Steele noted, "The most severe dental disease cases I have discovered have been in patients that owners report have had an 'anesthesia-free dental' within 6 months, and, unfortunately, these animals have had severe periodontal disease that I believe is related to managing the tooth surface with hand scalers and not effectively polishing out these micro-grooves."

Think of how tiny Missy's mouth is! Only under anesthesia can Missy be immobilized and examined without



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—MARTY BECKER, “AMERICA’S VETERINARIAN”

discomfort with intraoral radiology, removal of plaque and tartar above and below the gumline, and polishing.

Jenni Miller, CVT, VDT, also from Parker Center Animal Clinic, is very involved in her clinic’s dental procedure using anesthesia. Commenting on clinics that examine without anesthesia, she said, “I do not like the fact that a patient has to be physically restrained during the procedure.”

Julie Breher, DVM and owner of La Jolla Veterinary Hospital, in La Jolla, Calif., takes the time to describe the process in detail to her clients. She explains how the anesthesia is monitored and why the risk is minimal, actually outweighing the risk of future health problems.

But she’s seen clients wince when anesthesia is mentioned. At this point, she gently asks the pet owner, “What are you nervous about? Do you think your pet will die under the anesthesia?”

According to Breher, when clients have an opportunity to verbalize their fear, they are frequently more able to acknowledge that the risk is minimal and are then ready to listen to the doctor’s advice.

When she shows her clients the pet’s digital X-rays taken under anesthesia, they invariably say, “Oh, my. There is so much one cannot see with the naked eye.”

AAHA standards

The American Animal Hospital Association made an important change to its dentistry standards in August of 2013. AAHA now makes it mandatory that all AAHA-accredited hospitals provide dental procedures performed under general anesthesia with pets intubated. Intubation protects the trachea and prevents aspiration of water and oral debris.

As for clients presented the option of a dental exam without anesthesia, Woodward said, “In such cases, the pet owners don’t know they are receiving inferior service.” Breher used the term “malpractice” with reference to a dental exam without digital X-ray capability—only possible with anesthesia.

But my pet seems fine...

“But Missy appears to be fine,” the aforementioned cat owner with dental problems protested.

Veterinarians understand that animals tend to hide their pain. They are descended from animals in the wild that would be considered victims if they appeared weak. They will usually continue eating, until they are ready to die.

Wendy Hauser, DVM and technical services veterinarian with Merial in Parker, Colo., said that, in her 25 years in the veterinary business in which she has offered general dental services, she had heard over and over after the procedure, “She was right. My dog is so much happier!”

Understanding how preventive and wellness care are linked to dental exams and cleaning is apparently a “concept too difficult for ABC’s ‘20/20’ to grasp.” So says Marty Becker, “America’s Veterinarian” and guest on “Good Morning America” for 17 years.

Referring to a recent interview on “20/20,” Becker wrote in *DMV360*, “I talked about the importance of regular

veterinary exams, why we want to catch disease early on... how important preventive care is, and how we need to do more testing to get an accurate diagnosis before we prescribe a treatment plan.”

But, he said, “The interviewers kept coming back to a variation of the same question: the idea that dental care is an ‘up-sell.’”

Feeling misled in the interview, Becker decided to end his long relationship with ABC News. Both sad and angry to be part of a broadcast that he felt was unfair and biased, he wrote, “If preventive and wellness care isn’t a good thing, why do we go to our own dentists and doctors for wellness care?”

The business of dental care

Dental care can be a financial challenge for veterinarians—or it can be a financial opportunity. To secure the necessary training and equipment, including digital X-ray systems, you will invest as much as \$20,000.

Beyond that, there is ongoing training and training of your staff so that the entire team understands the importance of dental care. Veterinarians who offer dental service find that the payback is quite rapid—usually less than 1 year, maybe even 2 months. Clinics typically garner from 3% to 12% of their revenue from dental services.

Motichka points out that dentistry also helps drive many other areas, such as wellness lab work and surgical mass removals, that do not show up directly in the dentistry numbers. His assistant, Jenni Miller, adds, “It is cost-effective, because it prolongs the pet’s life.”

More complicated services, such as root canals, crowns, cancer treatment, jaw fracture repair, and advanced periodontal therapy, are referred to an AVDC Board-Certified Veterinary Dentist. Ed Eisner, DVM, chief of Dental Services at Animal Specialty Hospital near Denver, provides such services for animals, including the loved family pet, the valuable trained police dog and zoo animals.

There are only 133 Board-Certified Veterinary Dentists. That’s probably because such certification requires a 3-year residency followed by a 3-day exam. Since the candidates work on a reduced salary for these 3 years, the payback is slow. Why do they do it? Because of their



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passion and belief that it’s the right thing to do for the long-term health of our pets.

Convincing the unconvinced

How do you instill a similar passion in your clients? The answer we most often hear is education—informing clients of the connection between dental health and the long-term health of their pets.

Motichka says, “We also perform reminder calls within a month of recommended dental services, which help to touch base with pet owners and reinforce our recommendations.” Often, the clients will then choose to follow your advice with regard to dental check-ups and cleaning.

When it comes to explaining the connection between dental health and general well-being, there is a lot to explain. Christine Hawke, BSc, BVSc, MACVSc, PhD, of Sydney Pet Dentistry, in Sydney, Australia, boils it down to five simple tips:

- 1. Make sure that your clients understand that bad breath is not normal.** Bad breath means infection.
- 2. Choose your words carefully.** Plaque, tartar and gum recession are words we see every day on TV and on the toothpaste tube. Instead, use words like pus, infection and jaw bone destruction.
- 3. Use human analogies.** Most people know how bad a toothache is, or a broken tooth, or bad ulcers in the mouth. Things that hurt us will hurt pets, too.

4. **Use pictures.** In addition to photos and posters, take a quick snapshot of the pet's mouth in the examination room, enabling the client to see firsthand the condition of the mouth. You can even email the photo to the client to show the folks at home.
5. **Tell your client that animals will generally eat until they can't.**

The science of persuasion

But let's face it—education is not enough. You need to couple the facts with what we know about persuasion.

While you undoubtedly want to avoid appearing to make a “hard sell,” you should persuade your clients to heed your advice. Consider the “six universal principles of influence,” outlined by Robert Cialdini in his book *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*:

1. **Reciprocity.** Reciprocity sometimes results when a merchant offers a free sample or an offer of time. For example, the veterinarian can give clients appointments that are convenient, if the clients book in advance.
2. **Authority.** People are generally influenced by authority figures in their lives. When strong relationships have been built between veterinarians and their clients, clients find the veterinarians' advice and direction to be credible and compelling.
3. **Consistency with values and beliefs.** Once we have committed to an idea or a belief, we have a difficult time living according to conflicting values. In the veterinary world, this means that if your clients commit to good long-term health for their pets, they will have trouble denying dental care.
4. **Scarcity.** “Available for a limited time only.” We've all heard that, and it often gets us moving. To your client, you might book a limited number of dental procedures during a given week.
5. **Liking.** People are persuaded by those they like. Do your clients like you? Time spent in small talk and getting acquainted can lead to good feelings. If your veterinary staff members know how to listen with empathy, and to respect and appreciate the needs of your clients, your clients are more likely to “like” bringing their pets to your clinic.
6. **Social proof.** Cialdini used the term “social proof” to describe what you might know as conformity or social pressure. People want to purchase what their friends recommend.

How can we put all this together to serve our concern for dental health? Jim Clark, DVM at UC Davis Veterinary College, did just that when he spoke at the 2013 International Conference on Communication in Veterinary Medicine.

He helped those present to understand these six principles and then illustrated how they might be expressed in one succinct effort to influence the client to return for dental services.

Here's how Clark put it in a scenario:

Ms. Davis, you're one of our best clients (liking), and I know it's important for you to keep Tippy healthy and comfortable (consistency). Dr. Clark feels this dental cleaning is important (authority), and many of our clients schedule dental cleanings when their pet is about Tippy's age (social proof). We only have a few appointment slots still open this week for dentals (scarcity), but I'll find a way to fit Tippy in if you'd like to get this done (reciprocation). ✱

Resources

- American Veterinary Dental College (AVDC), which provides a directory of Board-Certified Veterinary Dentists
- Academy of Veterinary Dentistry (AVD)
- American Veterinary Dental Society (AVDS)
- Veterinary Industry Connections (VIN)
- Veterinary Dentistry Today Newsletter and blogs by Dr. Brett Beckman (*VeterinaryDentistry.net*)
- Dental lectures at national meetings



Carolyn C. Shadle, PhD, earned her doctorate degree from the State University of New York at Buffalo in interpersonal and organizational communication. She now provides writing and training through ICS, Inc. (icsworkplacecommunication.com).



John L. Meyer, PhD, earned his doctorate degree from the University of Minnesota in communication studies. Through ICS, Inc., he writes and provides training in interpersonal communication as well as speech arts.