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Teeth are Kate Knutson's passion. Knutson, DVM, is former American Animal Hospital Association president, and currently a TVC member and co-owner of Pet Crossing Animal Hospital & Dental Clinic in Bloomington, Minnesota. She co-authored both of the dental care guidelines published by the American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA). She leads in-house intensives across the United States creating individualized implementation strategies for increased compliance and higher profitability within the dental service of general practitioners. Knutson has spent her career advocating the importance of oral healthcare to colleagues and pet owners.

Yet when she looks at the statistics, she sees an incredibly large gap in effective oral healthcare practices, as well as a sizeable opportunity for veterinary practices to increase their importance in the lives of their patient base.

“Our numbers in dentistry have been fairly stagnant over the last 20 years,” she says. “Veterinarians have gone from serving 2 percent or less of the patient caseload with their oral health needs to maybe optimistically 8 percent. At the same time we have studies showing that 80 percent of dogs and cats over the age of three have some form of periodontal



disease. That indicates if I walked into a hospital and pulled records, every cat and dog three years and older needs to have their teeth charted, probed and X-rayed, along with addressing any found pathology. Only 20 percent would have mouths healthy enough to have a true prophylactic procedure. And yet only 2 to 8 percent of our patients are receiving the oral health care that they need.”

Dental disease and poor oral health care is at epidemic proportions, Dr. Knutson says. “Can you imagine the outcry there would be if we had a virus or bacterial disease causing 80 percent morbidity?”

The dental dividends

Poor oral healthcare of your patients aside, if 80 percent of your cats and dogs need to have a dental procedure, that is a hefty amount of dental revenue that remains uncollected. Since there are studies to demonstrate the amount of poor oral health in your patients, you know on average everyone walking in the door with teeth needs to either have prophylactic dentistry or an oral surgery, she says.

“Do the math on the number of cat and dog patients you have in your practice multiplied by the 80 percent with some form of dental disease, and then multiply what you charge for your various dental services. I suspect you will find it eye opening. Both as a veterinarian committed to health care and as a business practice committed to profitability, the gap between 8 percent and 80 percent cannot be justified.”

Dental disease not only causes the local problems of tissue damage, bone loss, inflammation and pain, it also and perhaps more importantly causes systemic issues that can decrease not only quality of life, but length of life. It has long been demonstrated as a causative factor on the human side in heart, kidney and pregnancy risk, along with other chronic conditions. Studies are indicating it is the same on the four-legged side, Dr. Knutson says. “We know that people who have good oral health have a longer lifespan because of it. If you

have a practice that focuses on wellness or preventative care, it is essential to make oral health an important part of the conversation with the pet owner in order to eliminate or delay systemic diseases caused by poor dental care.”

“If you start looking at the risk-benefit analysis, everybody walking through your door needs to have a dental procedure,” she says. “Anybody with teeth.”

It starts at the home

Dr. Knutson is a firm believer that proper pet dental care starts at home. “The least amount of home care we ask our



clients to provide is by feeding foods that have a VOHC seal of approval,” she says. For instance, there are many pet food products such as Science Diet Adult Oral Care dog food that is designed to protect dogs from plaque and tartar build-up. VetriScience Laboratories offers Perior Support dental supplements that are designed for use between scheduled cleanings to control plaque and support gum health. Ceva’s Clenz-a-dent chew sticks clean a pet’s teeth while chewing along with special enzyme coating to prevent bacteria from forming plaque and tartar in the mouth. The gold standard for home care is twice a day brushing with toothpaste formulated for pets.

Regular cleanings

Dr. Knutson says the second component involves early detection screenings, where you are examining the patient’s oral structure. It’s similar to the human side of getting your teeth probed, charted and cleaned during a regular visit,

then a follow-up procedure may be scheduled if something abnormal is found.

What’s been debated among veterinarians is how best to go about these cleanings. “We’ve often had the conversation about anesthesia free dental cleanings vs. anesthesia being used, when what we should have been having was a conversation about full mouth X-rays vs. no X-rays, charting vs. no charting, and probing periodontal pocket depths vs. not,” she says.

Full mouth X-rays, which involve anesthesia, should be a regular part of total dental care. Dr. Knutson’s practice recommends them yearly for their patients. “What we also need to be doing is charting the oral structures, which most practices don’t do,” she says. “I’ve been in more than 300 practices in my tenure with AAHA, and even AAHA practices don’t chart teeth appropriately, and some don’t take full mouth X-rays because they don’t own a dental X-ray machine.”

Dental cleanings cannot bridge the gap of total dental care. Only utilizing full mouth X-rays will allow veterinary

The procedure also benefits pet owners who may not understand the importance of oral health. These clients may be reluctant to pay for a surgical procedure because they don't appreciate how it fits in their pet's total healthcare plan. They will, however, do a less costly procedure. Once that is completed there is an opportunity for continued dental healthcare conversation and education which will eventually lead the client to full mouth X-rays.

practices to get a clearer picture of a patient's oral health. Dr. Knutson also believes that if used in their proper place in the spectrum of dental care – as a preventative procedure and early detection screening – anesthesia free dental cleanings done by properly trained technicians can be an integral part of a dental service. Done appropriately it will lead to better individual patient health care and increased profitability.

Not every pet is a candidate for this procedure. "That's the first thing that's important to know, patients are prescreened by their primary care physician," Dr. Knutson says. "For example, if you had a dog with pus coming out of its mouth, this isn't the appropriate procedure. That would be the same as placing a Band-Aid on an infected, oozing skin lesion." The oral healthcare early screening procedure is meant to be the same as what occurs when humans go in to get their teeth probed, charted and cleaned. "They don't have horrible disease, and they have to be patients who are not scared or have conditions which would preclude them from having this service. The service is an early detection procedure or cleaning procedure. Only full mouth X-rays allow a practitioner to make a diagnosis of what lies below the crown."

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Dental product best-sellers

Dentistry can be a renewable resource for veterinary practices, and one they should make a top priority for generating revenue. The following are product segments veterinary practices can highlight and sell to their client base to promote oral health:

Foods

"The least amount of home care we ask our clients to provide is by feeding foods that have a VOHC seal of approval," TVC Member Dr. Kate Knutson, DVM, says. For instance, there are many pet foods specially formulated to protect dogs from plaque and tartar buildup.

Supplements

VetriScience Laboratories offers Perior Support dental supplements that are designed for use between scheduled cleanings to control plaque and support gum health.

Chewsticks

Ceva's Clenz-a-dent chew sticks clean a pet's teeth while chewing along with special enzyme coating to prevent bacteria from forming plaque and tartar in the mouth.

Tooth brushes for pets

The gold standard for home care is twice a day brushing with toothpaste formulated for pets.

completed there is an opportunity for continued dental healthcare conversation and education which will eventually lead the client to full mouth X-rays. This can help clients avoid oral surgical nightmares that could cost thousands of dollars. Early detection and taking care of any issues much earlier will save them much more money in the long run.

Who can do this? Not many people have the expertise and training to probe, chart and clean/polish teeth in awake patients. Dr. Knutson says Animal Dental Care, a TVC vendor, has technicians that are very highly trained and have protocols in place developed from the AAHA dental guidelines.

For instance, when technicians chart the teeth, they may find an anomaly. Any abnormal findings are discussed with the veterinarian and healthcare team along with the client. For instance, they may identify a fractured tooth with pulp exposure. At this point the patient needs to be scheduled into the dental operator for an appropriate oral surgical procedure. An awake oral health care exam and early detection screening allows a risk/benefit analysis of whether the patient needs to be scheduled urgently for a surgical procedure or if the next probing, charting and cleaning procedure needs to be accompanied by full mouth X-rays which will include general anesthesia. Knutson says what trained techs find on their oral exams, most doctors aren't finding. "I've seen this everywhere, including my own hospital," she says.

Anesthesia free cleanings are not intended to be a complete dental program, rather a supplement. If there is a broken tooth or if the veterinarian notices a discolored, dead or dying tooth, there would need to be anesthesia for tooth extraction, or other oral surgical procedure. Because most of periodontal disease is happening below the gum line, any red flags would trigger the need for X-rays to better determine the best route of care.

If the pet patient meets the criteria to perform the anesthesia free dental procedure, there are numerous health and business benefits. Anesthesia is an acceptable risk when doing a cost/benefits analysis of a healthy oral cavity. However, "it is a waste of healthcare dollars for clients to pay for an anesthetic procedure when they don't need one," says Dr. Knutson.

A renewable resource

Many aspects of preventive veterinary care – such as an ovariohysterectomy – are onetime procedures. Dentistry, however, is a renewable resource, and one veterinary practices should make a top priority for generating revenue. Dr. Knutson says at her hospital, the dental service is about 30 to 40 percent of their gross revenue.

And as evidence by studies, dental care is something that 100 percent of the patient base will need, preferably in preventive care rather than crises. "In my mind, every general practice should have a vibrant, healthy, and profitable dental practice within their practice," Dr. Knutson says. ■

Be sure to check out the TVC News section (page 6) and see the promotions available for member/owners specifically for dental month.