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Better Management is Better Medicine®

Consistency and Clarity – The Key to Compliance – 2008

As educated, experienced veterinarians you know what's best for your patients. Clients place their trust in you when it comes to their pet's health and ideally follow your recommendations when it comes to keeping their pet healthy and comfortable. But the reality is that too often clients don't comply with your healthcare recommendations. Why does this breakdown occur?

Sometimes it's caused by a failure to give a clear and specific recommendation. Sometimes it's caused by information overload – faced with too much information and too many options, and without a clear recommendation from you, often the easiest thing for the client to do is nothing. And, sometimes it's caused by inconsistent messages within the practice. The client hears one message from the doctor, a different message from the technician, and perhaps a third message from another staff member, so they're confused about what to do.

In 2002 The American Animal Hospital Association conducted a landmark study summarized in, "The Path to High Quality Care", that revealed significant compliance gaps with what doctors believe is the best wellness care and treatment of medical problems for pets. AAHA studied six key areas of pet healthcare – heartworm testing and preventive, dental prophylaxis, therapeutic diets, senior screenings, core vaccines, and pre-anesthetic testing – and found that on average, when a veterinarian guesses that compliance is 75 percent it is really 50 percent.

In the ensuing years, have the compliance gaps changed? We set out to answer this question in [Benchmarks 2008: A Study of Well-Managed PracticesSM](#) conducted by Wutchiett Tumblin and Associates and *Veterinary Economics*. The results reveal there's still room for significant improvement.

Part of the problem is that in spite of an established medical standard of care, internal compliance among the doctors and staff with following the standard is woefully low in some areas. For example, 94% of Study participants say all of their doctors have a consistent philosophy regarding the frequency of vaccination. Yet internal compliance with following the standard is lower-than-expected – 28% of practices reported less than 80% compliance with their canine vaccination standard and 31% of practices reported less than 80% compliance with their feline vaccination standard. If all the doctors agree, why the inconsistency and does it matter?

Inconsistencies can occur because the practice may not have a well-established method of communicating the standard of care to doctors and staff. Or, the doctors may not discuss standards of care on a regular basis. Therefore, everyone assumes all the doctors are practicing similarly, when in fact they're not. These differences may lead to shortcomings in the patient's healthcare, and confusion among the doctors, staff, and clients. Differences in philosophy also create the potential for disagreements that can sour relationships within the practice.



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The medical standards in WellMPsSM shape the practice culture, the relationships with co-workers and clients, and the business of the practice. So defining and communicating your medical standards are critically important to the success of your practice. But before developing your medical standards, you must first identify your target client.

Is your goal to serve clients who seek only the best for their pets – and can afford it? Are you aiming at clients who want excellence in family pet health care and client service, but cost is sometimes an issue? Or, did you build your practice on attracting clients who want low-cost care? Be clear in your mind who you are and build your standards on that foundation. Trying to be all things to all people creates confusion for everyone and leads to low compliance rates.

Once you've defined your target client, develop written standards of care that identify the baseline healthcare components that each type of medical case will receive. Get everyone on the same page by involving your entire healthcare team in the development process. And use your standards as an on-going teaching tool to bolster consistency, continuity, and compliance within your practice.

Being proactive is an important step on the road to improved compliance. Take responsibility for ensuring your patients receive the care they need. Review the medical record each time you handle it to see if the patient is missing any necessary care. Always offer to schedule an appointment when potential clients call the practice – don't wait for them to ask because they might not. And proactively schedule the pet's next appointment for additional necessary care at the conclusion of the current visit. If the client isn't able to schedule at that time, call within a day or two to schedule the appointment.

Study results revealed that significant opportunities exist when it comes to enhancing client compliance with dentistry recommendations. WellMPsSM average about 1,900 active patients per doctor. Of those active patients, 26% are 3 to 6 years of age and 45% are greater than 6 years of age. Study participants estimated that many of their patients who fall into these age ranges need a routine dental prophylactic cleaning.

If on average 50 percent of the 3 to 6 year-old patients and 75 percent of the greater than 6 year-old patients had their teeth cleaned, it would result in about 890 dental prophylactic cleaning procedures per full-time equivalent doctor per year. The average number completed in 2007 was 114 per doctor. If the cost for a routine procedure averaged \$350, you could generate an additional \$270,000 per doctor. Good for the patient and good for the bottom line!

Minor, painless changes can result in significant, positive improvements when it comes to patient care. This also holds true when it comes to profitability. Profit requires planning and paying attention and is crucial to the continued success of your practice. Profit gives you the resources necessary to continue to raise the bar medically, invest in the facility and new equipment and technology, and fairly



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compensate owners, associates, and staff members. And, when you're ready to sell, profitable practices typically have higher value.

Charging for all the care you provide is a common opportunity to improve profitability. Yes, it's easy to miss a charge here and there. But those \$34 medical progress exams and \$22 fecal exams add up. And over time that total could be costing your practice team a coveted piece of equipment or the extra hands needed to smooth a busy day. Creating awareness within the practice is the first step to reducing the frequency of missed charges.

With all the talk about recession, many business owners are understandably nervous about what's coming. Will they experience a downturn? And if so, how long will it last? In a May 2008 Economic Update for the Ohio Society of CPAs, Anthony Chan, Ph.D., Chief Economist for JPMorgan Private Client Services in New York City, told the audience there is an increasing risk/high chance of a U.S. recession, but probably not a global recession. "In my opinion," Dr. Chan said, "the recession will likely last 8 to 14 months. Consumer spending may temporarily soften but the long term positive trend is on track."

While the concern about a recession is very real, the good news is that many veterinary practices have tremendous potential for continued growth by enhancing compliance with their existing patients' healthcare needs. Use Benchmarks 2008 as a resource to help take your practice to the next level. Enhanced compliance is good for the patient, good for the client relationship, and good for the bottom line.

To obtain additional information:

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