 Commentary

Are we really doing enough to provide the best veterinary care for our pets?

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Results of the AVMA’s 2013 US Veterinary Workforce Study indicate that the veterinary profession’s capacity to deliver services to companion animal patients substantially exceeds the current demand. Although we have little opportunity to modify the supply of veterinary services, I believe the profession has a marvelous opportunity to increase demand for veterinary services while enhancing the health of our nation’s pets.

Arguably, US veterinarians are the world’s best at treating illness and injury in our pets. Through our veterinary teaching hospitals, we have built an educational system focused on exposing students to the most difficult medical and surgical cases with oversight by board-certified specialists in many practice disciplines. What we have not done as well is educating our students in the delivery of primary care and, as a component of primary care, preventive medicine.

Over the past decade, companion animal practice has seen a substantial decrease in the frequency of veterinary visits. For both dogs and cats, for example, the mean number of veterinary visits was lower in 2011 than in 2001, and percentages of dogs and cats that did not visit a veterinarian in 2011 were higher than percentages for 2001. Simultaneously, there have been alarming increases in the prevalences of various preventable diseases in our pet population, including dental disease, obesity and overweight body condition, and internal and external parasite infestations. Human medicine has long realized improved patient outcomes by underscoring the importance of early disease detection and intervention. Historically, veterinarians have not been as diligent as our human medicine colleagues in educating clients on the importance of this concept. Stressing the benefits of annual checkups versus simply recommending the components of preventive care (e.g., vaccination or heartworm prevention) will undoubtedly result in healthier patients by allowing us to identify at least some problems before they become apparent to pet owners. Simply put, we are delivering less than optimal health care to our patients by not adequately emphasizing the value and importance of preventive health care.

To address this concern, the AVMA and American Animal Hospital Association have been leading Partners for Healthy Pets, a coalition of more than 110 veterinary organizations, including industry partners, state veterinary medical associations, allied veterinary organizations, and most of the US colleges of veterinary medicine. Organized as an entity within the American Veterinary Medical Foundation, Partners for Healthy Pets has adopted the mission of ensuring pets receive the preventive health care they deserve through regular visits to a veterinarian. For companion animal practices, this means placing a greater emphasis on delivering preventive health care and, just as importantly, helping practice teams do a better job of communicating the value and importance of preventive health care to clients. The aim is to encourage a lifelong partnership between pet owner and veterinarian to oversee delivery of a plan of preventive health care customized to the needs of individual pets. This means evolving the relationship between the veterinary team and client from a transaction-based relationship (in which clients exchange payment for specific services for their pets, such as a heartworm test) to one in which the client and veterinary team jointly develop a comprehensive program of preventive health care that covers the life of the pet.

Partners for Healthy Pets has produced a comprehensive toolbox to help companion animal practices deliver and communicate the value of preventive health care. Last September, it launched a consumer campaign focused on pet owners who had previously taken their pet to a veterinarian but not in the past 18 months. This campaign covers multiple media channels, including magazine ads, a television public service announcement, spokespersons for radio and television interviews, and social media. The campaign promotes the value of annual checkups, while also recognizing that the frequency of visits will ultimately be based on the needs of individual animals.

The short-term goal of Partners for Healthy Pets is to increase the frequency of preventive health-care visits, with the hope that practices that have heard the message are now or will soon be putting more emphasis on delivering and communicating the value of preventive health care, enhancing relationships with their clients.

Considering the long-term future of Partners for Healthy Pets, the coalition came to realize that the best possible outcome would be a fundamental change in the culture of our profession, so that veterinarians would focus first and foremost on keeping pets healthy, while continuing to be the world’s best at treating them when they get sick or injured.

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Our food animal colleagues in the veterinary profession have been delivering quality preventive medicine for years. It simply makes good economic sense to practice high-quality preventive health care in food animal medicine. Good preventive medicine also enhances the welfare of food animals by subjecting them to a lower incidence of disease and injury.

Many veterinarians will remember when dentists focused mainly on treating dental disease (ie, drilling and filling), whereas the current emphasis in the dental profession is on regular checkups and dental prophylaxis. The hope of Partners for Healthy Pets is that this same transformational change will occur in companion animal practice. Everyone wins under this scenario: pets live longer, healthier lives; pet owners have the best possible relationship with their pets; and veterinary professionals have more fulfilling, financially rewarding careers.

Finally, I submit that as veterinarians we are obligated under our Veterinarian’s Oath to practice good preventive medicine. The oath states “I solemnly swear to use my scientific knowledge and skills for … the prevention and relief of animal suffering ….” I believe we can and should do a better job of delivering on our oath through a greater emphasis on preventive health care for our companion animal patients.

I am encouraged by the changes that are becoming more and more evident within our profession. We are seeing far greater emphasis on primary care and preventive medicine in our college curricula. Primary care rotations are among the most popular for students at many US colleges of veterinary medicine. Private practices that thrived even during the depth of the recent recession appear to have mastered the ability to build lasting relationships with their clients, relationships that are focused on delivery of high-quality preventive health care and keeping their patients healthy.

References

New Veterinary Biologic Products

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product name</th>
<th>Species and indications for use</th>
<th>Route of administration</th>
<th>Remarks</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Autogenous Vaccine, RNA (Harrisvaccines, Ames, Iowa, US Vet Lic No. 592)</td>
<td>For vaccination of healthy pigs 3 weeks of age or older as an aid in prevention of disease caused by porcine rotavirus type C.</td>
<td>IM</td>
<td>USDA licensed 1/29/14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Infectious Hematopoietic Necrosis Virus Vaccine, DNA (Novartis Animal Health US, Inc)</td>
<td>The product is indicated for use in healthy salmonids as an aid in the prevention of disease caused by infectious hematopoietic necrosis virus. It is recommended that vaccination precede exposure of the fish to the disease agent by at least 400 degree-days (number of days multiplied by the mean water temperature [°C] during the period), and that fish not be vaccinated within 60 days of slaughter.</td>
<td>Anaesthetized fish (≥ 10 g) are administered a 0.05 mL IM injection in the area immediately anterior and lateral to the dorsal fin in the epaxial muscle.</td>
<td>USDA licensed 3/3/14</td>
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