

GAINING HOME CARE COMPLIANCE WHAT WORKS!!

Mary L. Berg, BS, RVT, RLATG, VTS (Dentistry)
Beyond the Crown Veterinary Education

Oral disease is one of the most prevalent diseases in dogs and cats. Over 80% of adult dogs and cats have some form of oral disease. Dental problems are among the top three pet owners concerns in dogs and cats. Calculus and gingivitis are the most common conditions diagnosed by veterinarians in all ages of animals.

Why is the incidence of dental disease so high? Is it due to lack of compliance or the lack of educating the client about the importance of dentistry? Pet's living longer lives, is one reason that oral disease is more prevalent. We are already improving so many aspects of their lives, but dental care seems to still be lagging behind.

Companion animals have become an important part of our lives. Many people consider the pet a part of their family. This bond has been important to the veterinarian and his staff because clients are more readily interested in seeking care for their pets. It is essential that communication remains open between all parties. All members of the veterinary team must be excited and motivated and thus project that enthusiasm to the client. The veterinarian and his staff must educate the client about the need for dentistry and convince them of its importance. Statistics show that 25 percent of your clients will accept whatever you say immediately; another 60 percent will take a little time to accept your recommendations; the remaining 15 percent will not accept your suggestions.

It is necessary to communicate the importance of dental treatment and oral care in many ways. It should become as routine as vaccinations and heartworm testing in your clinics.

Educate

As veterinary health professionals, it is our job not only to promote dentistry but to educate our clients about the importance of good oral health. How can we do this? Advertise, dental report cards, giving out toothbrushes and sample packets are a few ways to promote the services you offer. The technician is responsible for client education. Start this education process with your clients at the first or second puppy or kitten visit. Talk with them about the importance of good oral care by expressing the fact that the mouth is a mirror to the body. Give handouts explaining the relationship between oral disease and systemic health. Pictures are worth a thousand words. Use pictures to give the client an impression of what can happen if oral home care is not given to their pet!

The use of a dental report card is a great way to help the client understand the treatment that was given to their animal. Include a simplified dental chart on which problem areas can be marked or highlighted. A section for diagnosis, treatment, home care, prescriptions and follow-up visits should be included on this report card. Keep it simple and use bright, cheerful colors with clipart and before and after pictures on the take home sheet.

Education can be improved by letting the client be involved in the treatment plan. After the oral exam, review dental charts and radiographs with them. This simple task can reinforce the importance of the problem to the client. This can be difficult in dentistry, as treatment is often done while the animal is under anesthesia for the oral exam. However the review of the charts

and radiographs even after the treatment will be appreciated by the client. It can give them a sense of being involved. Be sure to explain the problem in terms that appropriate in order to ensure your client understands.

Here are a few terms that should never be used and terms that can substituted to gain compliance with medical needs.

Dental– This term doesn't really mean anything. It is a slang term that pet parents don't fully understand and may think is only a tooth brushing. This term can be replaced with **Professional Dental Cleaning, COHAT (Comprehensive Oral Health Assessment and Treatment), OAT (Oral Assessment and Treatment), ATP (Assessment and Treatment Plan) or Periodontal Therapy.**

Prophy – Unfortunately most dental procedures are not a prophylactic procedure but a treatment of the oral disease that is already present. Hopefully someday we will truly be performing prophies on at majority of our patients.

Periodontal Disease – Many clients may not truly understand this term unless they have it themselves. Use the terms – **infection and pain** instead. Clients understand infection and pain. Periodontal disease is an infection of the tissues surrounding the teeth and can be painful to our pets.

Recommend – Don't say "the doctor recommends a professional dental cleaning." A recommendation is just a suggestion. Say instead – "Your pet **needs** a professional dental cleaning." Replace *should* with **need** and *could* with **must**. This helps to tell the owner this is important and needs to be taken care of soon. If an owner hears "The pet needs to have a professional dental cleaning and it must be scheduled soon to prevent the infection from getting worse and risking tooth loss and systemic health problems" they are more likely to schedule the procedure instead of waiting.

Changing the vocabulary used in the veterinary practice can improve compliance. One way to gain client compliance is to change our vocabulary.

The conversation must occur at every visit no matter the reason for the visit. One survey showed that only 14% of dogs received dental care at a veterinary practice. With 80% of the patients having some degree of oral disease, that statistic is appalling.

Every patient, every time. An oral exam must be part of every checkup, regardless of why the animal was presented. The need for dentistry must be integrated into the practice philosophy and should become as routine as vaccines and heartworm control. The need for routine dental cleanings prevents disease just like a vaccine.

The dental procedures must also be done at the same level of perfection as all care in the practice. Team members and practice owner should commit to developing the skills and training of the staff to proper perform these procedures. It cannot be done superficially.

Incorporate dentistry into every wellness visit and use this opportunity to educate the client about good oral health and importance of preventing dental disease. Start early and set the stage for a lifetime of good dental health and an increased lifespan of the pet.

How to communicate

How we communicate is just as important as what we communicate. Using a relationship based approach that allows for two-way communication is vital to success. Use open ended questions and evaluate and validate the owner's knowledge and concerns. Remember both of you share a common goal of keeping the pet as healthy as possible. Ask the owner what they already know about dental disease. This allows the owner to be heard and they may already have a knowledge base and engages them in the conversation. Convey that information back to the owner to ensure you understood. This lets the pet owner know you were listening to them. Then ask if you could share more information that can help them better protect their pet. This allows you to educate the pet owner. Ask them to repeat the basics to ensure they have a good understanding of the information. You can then empower the pet owner by ensuring they are educated and know what is in the best interest of the pet. Share photos of diseased mouths and x-rays of bone loss. Many times a picture is worth a thousand words.

Explain the procedure, step by step, and let them know why each step is necessary. Give written home care instructions with before and after photos. Even send a print out of the x-rays home with the owner to demonstrate the value of the procedure.

Home Care is a vital part of periodontal treatment. All of the treatments listed above will temporary and may not be successful if the owner does not comply with home care instructions. Daily tooth brushing is the Gold Standard but not every individual is able to or willing to brush their pet's teeth. Investigate other, proven options for home care and follow up with clients on the success of the product. Schedule regular follow up appointments with clients to continually assess the status of the patient's oral health.

Client Communication

The proper use of dental charts and record keeping is a critical part of proper dental care. There are multiple types of charts available. A modified version of the dental chart can be used as a take home care sheet for the client that will help them understand the problem areas and home care instructions that were recommended for their pet. This form should also give a contact number for questions or concerns and the date of the follow-up visit.

A reminder letter can be a courteous reminder to client of the need for follow up visits. This can be sent after treatment related to periodontal disease or post surgical that explains the need for a follow-up visit. The need to evaluate healing and to evaluate home care effectiveness to ensure the continued prevention of disease progression and possibility of systemic disease should be addressed. Ask the client to call the office to schedule a follow up exam. Many clinics include the cost of the follow up visit in the initial service fees unless additional sedation or anesthesia is required.

Evaluate

Before you prescribe home care for a patient, it is important to assess the client and the animal. Is the owner ready, willing and able to perform proper home care? Are they committed, interested and physically able to provide care? Does the pet have the temperament to allow for home care? All of these aspects must be considered before prescribing any home care regime. It will not work to prescribe routine brushing if you know the client will not follow through. If this is the case, you may be better off recommending an oral care diet as opposed to brushing.

Another consideration that needs to be taken into the equation when recommending home care is the degree of treatment necessary. For young pets, the prevention of plaque accumulation can be achieved by plaque removal at least three times per week. For moderate accumulations and disease, following a professional dental prophylaxis plaque removal every other day can help improve oral health. When the degree of disease is severe, professional periodontal cleaning is necessary followed by twice a day chlorhexidine rinses for one week and then once a week chlorhexidine rinses and daily brushing.

Demonstrate

Demonstrate oral cleansing techniques to the client. Telling a client to brush their pet's teeth without a demonstration is of no benefit. When demonstrating, use a soft bristled brush or gauze. Use a 45 degree angle to the tooth and circular motion. It is important to start the demonstration on a dental model. This allows the client to see the actual brushing technique without the lips getting in the way. The model also shows them what all of the teeth look like and where problem areas might be lurking. Following the model, demonstrate on the owner's pet or a clinic pet. Demonstrate on one side and observe the client brushing the other side. By doing this, you are able to evaluate their techniques and offer suggestions and tips. If you use the owner's pet, you are also able to access the pet's temperament and acceptance of the tooth brushing.

A disclosing solution can be used to help demonstrate plaque on the teeth. This product comes in individual tubes with an applicator swab that allows the plaque on tooth to be disclosed without staining the fur. Not every client or patient is a candidate for tooth brushing. There are alternative methods of plaque control and removal. Work with your clients to determine which would be the best option for them and their pet.

Advise and Recommend

It is necessary to warn the client that an animal's failure to improve with tooth brushing may be due to an underlying disease such as; diabetes, kidney disease, FIV or leukemia. As veterinary professionals it is our duty to also warn the client about label claims. Not all products that say "veterinarian recommended" are good for their pets. Always recommend products with solid research to back those claims. Ask for the research results to prove the product will be efficacious.

In 1997 a group of Veterinary Dental Health specialists formed a group called the Veterinary Oral Health Council (VOHC). This council rewards products that claim to provide some type of oral benefit a seal of approval. This seal of approval was based on the American Dental Seal of Approval currently use for human products. The companies that have applied for this seal have tested their products using very strict protocols developed by the VOHC. Products that have this seal have good science behind them and have proven that they work. Additional information can be found at www.vohc.org. Look for it!!!!

There are many other chews and treats available that are efficacious but do not have the VOHC Seal. Ask the companies for the research to prove efficacy.

As with all treats, inform the client that treats can be high in calories therefore if they feed them regularly the regular dietary intake must be reduced. There are many chemical agents on the market that claim to have dental benefit. These agents range from pastes, sprays and gels

to water additives. Human toothpastes should never be used for pets as it contains phosphates and detergents that can affect the GI tract.

Animals must swallow the paste thus animal pastes are specifically designed without those harmful ingredients. Animal pastes also don't contain abrasives that are normally found in human pastes. The main benefit of using animal toothpaste is the great flavors that help encourage the animal to enjoy tooth brushing. Toothpaste also helps the client relate to brushing their pet's teeth. Humans use paste for brushing, so using a paste on their pet's teeth seems like a logical thing to do.

Gels with a neutral pH formulation of zinc gluconate, stabilized with taurine, in a tasteless gel. This gel does not contain chlorhexidine. The gel is widely accepted by both cats and dogs especially after oral surgeries as a method of keeping the wound clean and aids in healing.

There are many chlorhexidine gluconate rinses on the market. These gels are helpful in the prophylaxis procedure and can be dispensed to the client for treatment of varying degrees of periodontal disease.

The barrier method of plaque control can be a plaque prevention gel that electrostatically binds to the tooth forming a barrier to which plaque cannot attach or a sealant that reportedly helps prevent gingivitis for up to six months.

Remember it is our responsibility to evaluate, educate, demonstrate, recommend and advise our clients in regards to oral home care.

References

1. Logan, EI, Boyce EN: Oral Health Assessment in Dogs: Parameters and Methods. *J. Vet Dent* 11(2): 58-63.
2. Harvey, CE, Emily, PP: Periodontal Disease. In Harvey, CE, Emily, PP: *Small Animal Dentistry*. St. Louis: Mosby, 1993; 89-144.
3. Logan, EI, Finney, O, Hefferren, JJ: Effects of a Dental Food on Plaque Accumulations and Gingival Health in Dogs. *J Vet Dent* 19(1), 15-18.
4. Holmstrom, SE: Home-Care Instruction, in Holmstrom, SE: *Veterinary Dentistry for the Technician and Office Staff*. W.B. Saunders Company, 2000; 183-194.
5. Gorrel, C: Preventive Dentistry, In Gorrel, C: *Veterinary Dentistry for the General Practitioner*. Saunders, 2004; 111-118
6. Logan, EI, Berg, ML, Coffman, L, Hefferren JJ.: Scientific Basis for Prevention. *Proceedings of the 14th Veterinary Dental Forum* 2000; 261-264