

A veterinarian in blue scrubs and white gloves is performing a dental procedure on a dark-colored dog. The dog is lying on a blue surgical drape. The veterinarian is using a dental instrument on the dog's teeth. In the background, another person in white scrubs is visible. There are papers and a syringe on the table in the foreground.

Marketing Veterinary Dentistry in your practice

Dr. Anthony Caiafa

The number of dental procedures performed on pets has been steadily increasing over the past ten years. From our 'ignorant' early days (let's face it – we were not taught much on oral diseases in pets as undergraduates), Veterinary Dentistry now makes a significant contribution to small animal practice income.

Unfortunately for some veterinarians dental procedures are still regarded as frustrating chores that are undertaken reluctantly. All too often the onus on performing these procedures is left to recent graduates within the practice. These young veterinarians are often left to their own devices when performing a 'dental'. The lack of dental training, treatment protocols, poor equipment, and inadequate allocation of procedure time leads to frustration and a disinclination to do what is necessary. The results are unsatisfactory for all involved parties including the pet.

Am I painting a familiar picture?

With regard to Veterinary Dentistry, I feel that things are getting slowly better.

As a direct result from lobbying by members of the AVDS, new graduates of all Australian University Veterinary Faculties, now have some lectures in Veterinary Dentistry and some practical demonstrations in performing dental procedures. It is not enough, but it is a start, and certainly 1,000% better than when I was taught as an undergraduate.

The Australian Veterinary Dental Society (AVDS) has been running lectures in Dentistry for the past 13 years.

In the USA, there is an annual conference dedicated to Veterinary Dentistry that has over 500 delegates attending each year and the numbers are growing.

There is a peer reviewed international journal dedicated to Veterinary Dentistry that has been published for at least 16 years.

Yes, training and education in Veterinary dentistry is getting better. But I am straying from the lecture topic. You are asking: what *financial benefits* can be gained from marketing Veterinary Dentistry within *my* practice?

To answer this question, firstly there must be a need for dental treatment. If there is no disease, then no treatment is required.

However, we do know that there is a lot of disease out there and it walks into your practice everyday.

Most oral disease is missed or ignored by practitioners who may be too busy to look, too ignorant of the problems real or potential or concentrating on other areas.

Why offer veterinary dentistry for your clients' pets?

About 4 out of 5 dogs and cats aged over 3 years that walks through your front door has some dental disease lurking inside their mouths, then why ignore an opportunity which is beneficial all round?

In the past 3 decades veterinary practice has seen some major changes to practice: from mostly 'fire-brigade' type work with a large percentage of desexing procedures; to more preventative-type work ('wellness' examinations) and far fewer cases of viral diseases (Distemper, Parvovirus or

Panleukopaenia), desexing procedures, skin problems (flea control can now work!) and trauma cases (tighter legislation over wandering pets).

Today, most pet owners are caring and dedicated to their pets and these pets are living longer. Thankfully we are seeing fewer owners willing to 'dispose of this one and get a replacement' just because of convenience!

Growth areas in small animal practice at this time are: geriatrics, oncology and dentistry.

What do we know about dental diseases in cats and dogs?

We know that somewhere between 60-85% of cats and dogs (based on a number of overseas studies) coming into your practice will have some degree of gingivitis/periodontitis.

This means that around three out of every four cats and dogs entering your practice today will have oral disease! Furthermore, periodontal disease is *THE MOST COMMON* chronic infection seen in man and animals. In its early stages it is asymptomatic. The first warning is bad breath (halitosis) and is often a late symptom but is usually the main reason for presentation of the pet to the clinic.

We also know that the smaller breeds of dogs are more susceptible to oral disease. This is due to a number of factors which includes tooth crowding (smaller jaws), inappropriate diets, and less bone surrounding the teeth so that periodontal pathogens can destroy the bone and cause disease at a faster rate than in larger breeds of dog.

At least 1 out of every 3 cats brought into your practice will have one or more dental resorptive lesions which are progressively destroying tooth structure and causing significant pain to the cat!

There are also the dogs and cats that severely wear their teeth down due to chronic skin complaints (constant chewing at their skin), not to mention the trauma cases with fractured jaw bones and/or fractured teeth often complicated with pulp nerve exposure.

Not only this, but most of your clients are becoming more 'dentally aware' these days and recognise the importance of preventive oral care to prevent or minimise disease not only for themselves but also for their beloved pets.

Have I got your attention? Without seeing any new clients, there is enough oral disease that requires treatment already sitting in your files and records. You just have to recognise this and promote good oral health for your patients.

Are you missing the dental boat?

A number of practices have already seen the benefits of promoting good oral health for their clients' pets. This has led to an improvement in their bottom line. These practices are undertaking further education and hands on training in Veterinary Dentistry as well as purchasing equipment that makes dental procedures less of a chore, faster to perform and with more satisfaction that you are doing a thorough job. The owners also appreciate this improved level of dental care and increased attention that their pets receive and are therefore *willing to pay more* for these services.

These practices are also training their nursing and reception staff to better handle questions from their clients regarding the appropriate homecare products to use, how they work, how often does a pet need a teeth clean etc. These practices recognise that to survive in a shrinking marketplace they need to offer niche services and offer those services that are profitable.

Dentistry can be one of those services.

There is no reason why any practice with a little extra thought, education and equipment expenditure could not increase the dental proportion of their gross to over 10% per annum.

Marketing Veterinary Dentistry can be as simple as doing a thorough oral examination during a vaccination check-up. You will be surprised at how much disease you will find. Show the owner what you see. You can demonstrate this often by pointing out the pathology i.e. the swollen gums, the broken tooth. The use of plaque disclosing solutions will demonstrate the disease. Most conscious animals will allow you to gently use a periodontal probe/explorer to point out infection and exposed roots. Most owners will want to help their pets once they are aware of a problem. Educating clients about their pet's dental needs must become a part of your usual routine.

During **Pet Dental Health Month** (usually August of each year in Australia), advertise dental awareness through waiting room displays and offer *free dental checks* on certain days during the month. Clients appreciate this free service and there is no doubt that you will find disease. Put an article in the local newspaper regarding something dental that you have done. Newspapers love these good news stories. With the advent of digital photography, take photographs of 'horrible' mouths that you have treated with say before and after treatment shots. Enlarge these photographs and include them in your dental display.

Use dental models to demonstrate oral disease, or get your nurses to show clients how they can brush their pets' teeth.

Where do I begin? – Getting started in Veterinary Dentistry

To begin with, you need a strategic plan. For the practice to deliver an exceptional service in Veterinary Dentistry, you need to set goals and have the resources to achieve these goals. Getting staff involved in the development is both motivating and team building.

Firstly, go out and get more training and education for yourself and your staff. This may include in-house workshops, seminars or attending Veterinary Dental conferences.

Identify what level of service that you want to offer your clients in the field of Veterinary Dentistry. You may not want to do root canal treatments or orthodontics or other advanced procedures, but to even offer good periodontal therapies including extractions, you need a certain level of equipment which should include a dental base which has slow and high speed handpieces, a triplex water/air handpiece as well as an ultrasonic scaler. You need to set yourself up with good quality equipment which will pay for itself very quickly in time savings per dental procedure, more procedures performed, and the ability to advertise the fact that you are 'set-up' to offer a higher level of dental services.

These steps and increasing client awareness regarding dental disease is the first phase of developing a dental niche.

With the purchase of better equipment and higher quality dental care, you can charge higher fees. Use your dental knowledge and skills to set yourself apart from neighbouring practices.

Going further in Veterinary Dentistry

Once established and comfortable with your ability to perform good dentistry, you may want to go to the next level. This may include offering the option of saving broken teeth by doing root canal therapy and restoring lost tooth structure with "white fillings".

To go to the next level, a dental X-ray machine is an essential tool. These machines are designed to make the taking of dental X-rays convenient and simple thus enhancing its use.

They can be trolley or wall mounted (near your wet-prep table where you do your dental procedures) and I strongly advise the latter.

This equipment is readily available on the second hand market and should not cost any more than AU\$1500. Even for practices not offering advanced dental services, a dental X-ray machine is money well spent. It will allow you to diagnose a lot more disease especially disease occurring below the gums, disease that would normally be missed in a visual/tactile dental examination. It especially helps in identifying abscessed teeth or cat's teeth with subgingival dental resorptive lesions. It helps identify teeth with root ankylosis or root abnormalities all of which is important to know prior to an extraction attempt!

The radiographic film costs are minimal and the client will appreciate being shown on the radiograph what disease you have found in their pet's mouth.

Where is Veterinary Dentistry heading?

Certainly, Veterinary Dentistry is following in the footsteps of human dentistry. Saving pet's teeth will have higher priority in owners' minds. Owners will be willing to pay more for advanced dental procedures and better oral care for their pets.

The development of better plaque reducing products will continue. With the advent of safer anaesthetic agents (i.e. Sevofluorane) and anaesthetic protocols, periodic professional dental care under general anaesthesia will become more common place.

As our pets live longer, oral disease will become a more prominent cause of illness and discomfort. Oral disease may impact more negatively on overall systemic health as well as contributing to other organ failure. Our aging pets will require more intensive management of their oral disease.

This will equate to more practice visits.

In conclusion, ignoring or overlooking the dental needs of our patients is an opportunity missed, to not only serve the client and their pet better, but a lost opportunity to improve the profitability of the practice.

Dr. Anthony Caiafa. University of Melbourne, Veterinary Clinic and Hospital. **Email** toothdoc@tpg.com.au

Reference: Creating a dental service niche- Past and future possibilities C. Eisner 17th Annual Veterinary Dental Forum Proceedings, San Diego, 2003.