

## **SOME ASPECTS OF EXOTIC PET PRACTICE MANAGEMENT**

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### **Abstract**

As the demand for exotic pet medicine increases, practitioners involved in this field are devoting increasing resources (time, equipment, study) to providing a comprehensive service to meet their clients' (and patients') needs. It is therefore imperative that their practice management be oriented to not only meeting this requirement, but also to ensure that a healthy financial return is available to the practitioner.

In this presentation the author will present and discuss some aspects of practice management that are particularly relevant and/or unique to exotic pet practice.

### **Overview**

Areas of practice management that will be discussed in this presentation include:

- Your clients – who are they, and how do you get them in the door?
- Client education
- Equipment and inventory – what do you need, and how much?
- Workplace Health and Safety
- Staff training
- Efficiency and Profitability

### **Your clients – who are they, and how do you get them in the door?**

Exotic pet owners come from a broad range of society – the unemployed and the professional, the young and the old, male and female, amateur pet owner or professional breeder. They all share two common characteristics – a love of unusual and exotic animals and a keen interest in keeping them.

Marketing your practice to such a broad range of potential clients is a mixed blessing. On one hand, these people share a deep commitment to their pets and are always looking for information and assistance. On the other hand, their spread across society means that only a few marketing tools will be guaranteed to reach everyone.

Marketing can be either direct (aimed solely at potential clients) or indirect (using other parties to attract clients to your practice).

- Direct Marketing

- a. Advertising in the Yellow Pages or special interest magazines. Use these mediums to differentiate your practice from other veterinary practices.
  - b. Speaking at club meetings confirms your interest and cements your authority on exotic animals (if done correctly).
  - c. Writing newsletter and magazine articles is a powerful tool. After all, if a veterinarian is published, he/she must be an authority!
  - d. Hosting information seminars for existing and potential clients can also be a powerful tool for both attracting new clients and cementing your relationship with existing clients. The author's experience is that exotic pet owners thirst for knowledge, and welcome the opportunity to attend seminars.
  - e. Your practice website should provide basic information on keeping and caring for exotic pets (so as to attract potential clients to your site) and then spell out just what services you can offer.
  - f. Your practice image, from letterhead to external signage, should reflect your interest and commitment to exotic pet medicine. Clients soon detect whether a practitioner is truly an 'exotic pet veterinarian', or a general practitioner incorporating exotic pets into their practice as a sideline.
- Indirect marketing
    - a. Speaking at local veterinary association meetings both explains to your colleagues just what you can do for exotic pets and also encourages them to refer cases to you. Care must be taken not to be seen to be 'poaching' clients – for example, while it is appropriate to treat a referred client's exotic pets, it may not be appropriate to agree to treat their dogs and cats.
    - b. Soliciting referrals from existing clients is done by providing them with exceptional services and then asking them to refer their friends to you.
    - c. Creating a 'media image' through press releases of unusual cases. The author's experience is that the press loves these sorts of stories, and it is amazing how many people mention them both at work and socially.

Once you have the clients in the door, the next step in marketing is to keep them coming back. Making their visit an exceptional experience, providing them with the right information, giving their pets the best care, and then following up your patients after discharge all create a positive image in your clients' minds.

## **Client education**

A client who has been well-educated on the care of their pets is a client who will seek out veterinary assistance for both preventative health care as well as emergency medicine. Educating clients is therefore an important part of establishing your reputation as an exotic pet practitioner. This education can be delivered through:

- The practice website
- Educational brochures e.g. AAVAC brochures
- Magazine articles
- Quality time with the veterinarian during a consultation with a thorough discussion on husbandry and its effect on the patient's wellbeing.
- Appropriate 'Point of Sale' literature e.g. Australian Bird Keeper publications, Australian Reptile Keeper magazine, Australian Reptile publications.

### **Equipment and inventory – what do you need, and how much?**

To use an Americanism, it is no good talking the talk if you can't walk the walk. In other words, all your marketing efforts will be in vain if, when your client walks in the door, you cannot deliver on the services you have promised. Although for many years it has been touted that quality exotic pet medicine can be achieved with the equipment found in the average small animal clinic, advances in exotic pet medicine have meant that specialised equipment is becoming increasingly more necessary. Examples of equipment that can be found in an exotic pet practice include:

- "Must Have"
  - a. accurate gram scales
  - b. separate hospitalisation area (away from dogs and cats i.e. predators)
  - c. dedicated caging including brooders
  - d. Ophthalmic or microsurgical instruments
  - e. Radiography facilities for small patients
  - f. Referral laboratory experienced in exotic pet clinical pathology
  - g. Selection of feeding tubes
- "Nice to Have"
  - a. Rigid endoscopy
  - b. ultrasound
  - c. In-house laboratory
  - d. Respiratory ventilator for anaesthesia of small patients
- "If Only"
  - a. digital radiography
  - b. endoscopic surgery facilities

On the flip side, the inventory requirements for an exotic pet practice are surprisingly light compared to a small animal practice. Smaller quantities of relatively fewer drugs can make inventory control and investment simple. In many cases it may be more appropriate to script out prescriptions to a

compounding pharmacist. Although this at first appears to be lost income, the savings generated by not having to carry some drugs – and throw them out when their shelf-life expires – can make prescribing an attractive option.

## **Workplace Health and Safety**

Practitioners who have worked in traditional small animal practices are familiar with the Workplace Health and Safety requirements in veterinary practice. All of these requirements exist for exotic pet practices, but there are some unique aspects of exotic pet practice that need to be considered. These include:

- venomous animals e.g. snakes
- zoonotic diseases e.g. avian chlamydiosis, Salmonellosis (reptiles), Herpes B (primates), etc.
- allergies e.g. to feather dander
- bites and scratches from small animals that can be difficult to restrain

Practitioners involved in exotic pet practice need to give serious consideration to staff training and practice protocols to minimise the risk that exotic pets present to both staff and clients.

## **Staff training**

The image that your practice presents starts with the staff member who answers the phone and continues on through to the discharge of a hospitalised pet and the completion of follow-up revisits and telephone calls. At all times it is essential that all staff members appear to be knowledgeable, comfortable and competent with all species of exotic pets. This can only be achieved through continuous staff training. This can be achieved through:

- formal staff training – either in-house, or provided by external seminars or training organisations;
- providing staff with the opportunity to participate in ‘exchanges’ with other practices, giving them the opportunity to broaden their experience.
- allowing all staff to observe and participate in clinical procedures;
- encouraging staff to own or care for exotic pets. In the author’s practice, for example, chicks bred by the author are hand reared by the staff so that they can all competently advise clients on hand rearing – based on their own experiences.

A program of ongoing staff training, although at times demanding on the practice owner, has dividends far beyond the time and money expended in the training.

An aspect of staff training that is sometimes overlooked is Continuing Education for the veterinarians in the practice. This takes several forms:

- attendance at conferences and seminars

- on-line training e.g. VIN
- subscriptions to various journals – both professional and lay
- ‘Practising’ on wildlife and surrendered animals.

### **Efficiency and Profitability**

Exotic pet practice has long been considered by many veterinarians to be unprofitable. This appears to be based on:

- their perception that clients are unwilling to pay for veterinary services for non-traditional pets;
- their reluctance to charge appropriately, perhaps because they feel ‘under-trained’ in this field, and therefore shouldn’t charge as much as they do for dogs and cats<sup>1</sup>; and
- The relative inefficiency of exotic pet practice, in that consultations, surgery, hospital care, etc take longer than most dog and cat work.

With this perceived lack of profitability, many veterinarians are understandably reluctant to devote much time, equipment and other resources into developing the exotics ‘side’ of their practice. This, if course, provides plenty of opportunities for those veterinarians who wish to take exotic pet practice seriously!

So what are some techniques that can be used to increase practice profitability and efficiency? Not surprisingly, they are the same techniques that are used in other styles of successful veterinary practices. In 2005 the AVMA and Pfizer co-operated in conducting a study of business practices of veterinary clinics in the USA.<sup>2</sup> They found that successful veterinary clinics shared similar characteristics:

- Frequent review of financial data
  - a. Change in income
  - b. Average transaction
  - c. Production per doctor
- Employee development
  - a. Written and oral job evaluation
  - b. Written job descriptions
  - c. Defining performance expectations
  - d. Staff training
- Negotiating skills
  - a. Client communications
  - b. marketing
- Client loyalty
  - a. Phone skills
  - b. Welcome letters, sympathy cards, etc
  - c. Gifts to clients
- Client retention
  - a. Welcoming, clean environment
  - b. Conflict resolution

- c. Staff customer service training
- Leadership skills
  - a. Clear, concise directions to staff
  - b. Respect for clients and staff
- New client development
  - a. Advertising
  - b. Public relations

Looking at these characteristics, it would seem that they can be summarised as follows:

- Marketing, both external and internal, to attract and retain the clients you want;
- Recruit, train and retain the best staff, and use them to release veterinarians to do clinical work i.e. to assess patients, develop a diagnostic plan, and then implement treatment.
- Monitor the practice's performance and make adjustments to fees, policies and procedures as required.

Once a successful marketing plan (see above) has clients coming in the door, it is up to the practice's client relations plan to establish rapport with them if you wish to retain them. It is not enough to provide the best technical service in your region – the clients must like you, your staff and the service you offer. This attitude and service is reflected in:

- How your staff answer the phone;
- The appearance of the clinic, both external and internal;
- How clients are treated by your staff at reception;
- How clients are treated by the veterinarian;
- How complaints are dealt with;
- The care and follow-up each patient receives.

You will notice in this list that fees are not mentioned. Veterinary fees for exotic pets should reflect the veterinarian's commitment, both financial and otherwise, to providing the best care – not the size or purchase price of the pet! Many successful exotic practices charge more than dog and cat practices, reflecting this commitment. And, perhaps unsurprisingly, exotic pet owners continue to beat a path to their door.

The inherent inefficiency in an exotic pet practice – the length of time needed to take a history, examine the patient, develop a diagnostic and treatment plan, and educate the client – can be addressed in several ways:

- Leverage your staff (through good training) so that they can perform all the non-clinical tasks:
  - a. Care of hospitalised patients
  - b. Taking a basic history
  - c. Performing laboratory tests

- d. Preparing medications and teaching the clients how to administer them
- e. Routine procedures such as grooming
- f. Discussing with clients better husbandry and nutrition for their pets
- g. Client 'call backs'
- Utilise client handouts and your website to reinforce the education given to clients in the consultation room

### **Recommended reading**

Lennox AM (ed) The exotic pet practice; in Veterinary Clinics of North America: Exotic Animal Practice. Elsevier 2005. 8 (3).

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<sup>1</sup> A survey conducted by the Queensland Division of the Australian Veterinary Association in 2006 of 39 Brisbane veterinary practices showed the average consultation fees were: dogs \$43.82; cats \$44.56; birds/exotics \$35.52 – in other words, consultation fees for exotics were 20% less than dogs and cats!

<sup>2</sup> Volk JO, Felsted KE, Cummings RF, et al. Executive summary of the AVMA-Pfizer business practices study. JAVMA 2005; 226: 212-31.