

Bracing for the New Normal

Lowell Ackerman*

Global Consultant, Author and Lecturer, Westborough Massachusetts, USA

***Corresponding Author:** Lowell Ackerman, Global Consultant, Author and Lecturer, Westborough, Massachusetts, USA.

Received: May 16, 2020; **Published:** August 10, 2020

Abstract

Life has changed for veterinary practices, the hospital team, clients and even pets. Periodically the world experiences events considered “shocks” that change the fundamental way we do things. These events can include such diverse things as war, terrorist attacks, financial crises, climate change, and pandemics. Even though the event may only occupy a finite span of time, the after-effects can last significantly longer. The changes seen in veterinary hospitals are often far-reaching and include elements of keeping both clients and staff safe, expanding the use of telehealth services, dealing with economic insecurity, retail considerations, financial risk management, and improving client engagement. As economic shocks appear to be occurring with some regularity, it is important to adapt to the realities that follow.

Keywords: *Veterinary Practices; Hospital Team; Clients; Pets; Economic Shocks; Pandemic*

Dealing with a pandemic has been challenging for the profession, but potentially even more challenging will be coming to terms with changes to the practice model that are likely to remain with us long after the viral threat has passed. We now must contend with client attitudinal changes that affect what they are looking for and what they will accept in veterinary interactions. This will become the “new normal” for the profession, so it is worthwhile preparing for now.

Keeping staff safe and healthy

Veterinary staff are typically well educated and dedicated to animal health, but at the same time they want to protect themselves and their families from transmissible diseases, and their concern is legitimate. For the foreseeable future, we should expect that they will appreciate ongoing instruction on practice safety protocols, patient flow, and access to appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE). Because veterinary teams work collectively, there should be protocols in place for monitoring the health of individual staff members, having policies for isolation and quarantine, and supporting unambiguous and generous policies about which situations should prompt team members to leave the premises to preserve the health of others. Most veterinary hospitals have a relatively small contingent of team members, so without careful and considerate policies, staff could wrongly interpret that their health is not a major concern of the hospital, which would be a very unfortunate conclusion.

Veterinary staff are extremely valuable, and their health is an important concern, so there should be ongoing dialogue about what steps the hospital is taking to keep everyone safe. Whenever possible, such protocols should be institutionalized as standards of care and staff should be counseled and coached as to what they should be doing to keep themselves and each other safe. It is important to consider even

minor risks and work collectively to address concerns. When staff appreciate that their ongoing health is a major priority, and when it is reinforced by other team members, they can be confident that things are being done to mitigate their risks for getting sick. It is important to realize that fear is likely to persist long after a pandemic, so relaxing standards should only be contemplated after robust team discussions and the best available evidence.

Keeping clients safe and healthy

Clients are quite aware that the world has changed and it is likely that they have spent a considerable amount of time in stay-at-home isolation. Expect that they will be fearful of going into many different types of businesses, and are looking for assurances that they, their pets and their families will be safe in their interactions with the veterinary team. Many of them will have been working from home, teleconferencing for work as well as with family and friends, doing much of their shopping online, downloading their entertainment, and receiving much of their purchases by home delivery.

Clients have also changed dramatically in terms of their knowledge of infectious disease transmissibility, hand washing, physical (social) distancing, and the wearing of face masks. This type of vigilance and anxiety are likely to continue, and pet owners will be looking for some assurance that the veterinary hospital is a safe place to visit.

Many clients will have some trepidation about returning to businesses, including their own physicians and so veterinary hospitals should not consider themselves unaffected by this. Client anxiety may be heightened if they don't have access to a vehicle but are hesitant about the inherent risks of using public transportation or ride-sharing. This apprehension can be allayed if teams explain all the protocols in place to keep them and their pets safe, and this might include telehealth options based on telephone triage with clients. For pets that need to be seen in hospital, clients should receive instructions on how this can be done safely, and expectations should be established for how the visit will be conducted in a step-by-step manner. This might include instruction for the pet owner to wear a face mask, access they may or may not have to the facility, whether they are allowed to accompany their pet for its veterinary visit, communication options with the veterinary team, and what is being done to ensure their safety. Even long after the pandemic has passed, clients will likely have developed habits around hand washing, physical distancing, and the use of hand sanitizers, and everything possible should be done so they can feel comfortable seeking veterinary care.

Expectations for telehealth

An increasing number of our clients have become quite familiar with teleconferencing in their daily lives. This comfort has extended to dealing with their physicians, and telehealth consulting with veterinary teams should be presumed to become a routine matter and perhaps even a preference for many clients. The interaction can be synchronous (real-time) or asynchronous (request then respond) but the expectation of clients will likely be that there are many times when dealing with pet care virtually is preferred. It's not just a matter of personal safety, but many clients have found this to be convenient as well.

We should anticipate that many clients will be receptive to the practice of telehealth, and this is also a great way for pets to be triaged before exposing them to our facilities and hospital teams. Some conditions will be more amenable to virtual care than others, and clear guidelines should exist as to what can be attempted through this platform, and what should prompt advice for the animal to be seen in the hospital.

Remote monitoring is also available for our patients, and a variety of clinical attributes can now be measured at home. This includes collars that can measure activity, heart rate, respiratory rate and some aspects of body temperature, but other devices such as glucometers can also be used. This can be very helpful for hospice patients, post-surgical patients, and those with a need for routine monitoring.

Many clients are familiar with a variety of options for virtual connection, but hospitals should be comfortable with the privacy protections for any type of telehealth attempted, and it is best if the hospital designate only a few programs with which they have comfort in this

regard, and at which teams can gain proficiency. Because telehealth is likely to become a routine part of veterinary practice going forward, one of the most important things for veterinary teams to have in place are the criteria for telehealth visits, the structure of those visits, and the fees associated with telehealth consults. Telehealth needn't be a money-losing proposition for the practice and can be as or more profitable than other types of services if instituted correctly.

Economic insecurity

The impact of the pandemic was not felt equally across populations, and yet uncertainty can be expected to persist well into the future as far as most consumers are concerned. Many had interruptions in their ability to work and earn money, some may have had to deal with personal tragedies and the uncertainty of what might come next often influences spending decisions. Thus, it is reasonable to suspect that clients might be hesitant when it comes to expenditures on their pets. For others, they may prefer to postpone procedures that are not considered essential and immediate until they feel more financially secure.

Following any economic shock, such consumer attitudes are inevitable, and veterinary practices should anticipate this and plan their client messaging accordingly. There should be unequivocal communication about what services should be prioritized and which can be delayed, not to scare clients, but to help them make informed decisions for the care of their pets. It may also be advisable to establish credit terms for procedures that might be pre-approved by the hospital, as well as payment plans that might allow clients to do the work recommended but spread payment out over a longer interval. If done correctly, these can be profitable for the practice, as well as convenient for pet owners.

Retail considerations

If your clients were not used to making online purchases before the pandemic, that has likely changed, and they have now established a new comfort level for dealing with e-commerce. Expect that this will continue, and many clients will also be considering and researching making online purchases for their pet supplies, foods and medications.

This is the time to consolidate and promote online retail, as this is not only convenient for your clients, but increases the safety of your staff as well. Veterinary hospitals might consider aligning with an online veterinary pharmacy and directing clients towards such purchases. It is important that veterinary practices price their products competitively, so clients can make a seamless transition to online purchasing without having to price shop for better deals elsewhere. It is possible for veterinary hospitals to do this profitably, because with online pharmacies and retailers there are no inventory costs for the practice. While it might seem that veterinary hospitals could stock and dispense products and keep a larger share of the revenue, it can actually be more satisfying to earn a profit margin without having to deal with all the costs of maintaining inventory.

In some countries, veterinary medicine still involves actual cash exchange, but following a pandemic expect that most customers will prefer cashless transactions, and even more likely - contactless transactions where there is not even the handling of credit or debit cards. It is important to consider payment options carefully, and this retail experience is likely to continue long into the future.

Financial risk management

In times of turmoil, people often safeguard their cash reserves and postpone everything that is not considered essential. In an emergency situation, that might also necessitate postponing things that are actually essential, including rent, mortgage, groceries and even health care. Because veterinary care is often considered a discretionary expense, it can become a low priority if there is not a system in place to help ensure funding for such care.

If at all possible, this is a time to consider ways to help pet owners manage their financial insecurity around pet expenditures. This can be done by recommending pet health insurance, if available, and also by considering payment plans (also known as wellness or concierge

plans), which offer established fees charged intermittently (often monthly) for a defined basket of services. Pet health insurance helps “flatten the curve” when it comes to unanticipated expenses, while payment plans “smooth the curve” for anticipated expenses (vaccines, parasite control, etc). Both allow pet owners to budget more effectively for veterinary care without having to contend with periodic “spikes” in expenditures. Because most consumers will be anxious about all expenses, this will help pet owners plan for needed care without adversely affecting practices. If positioned correctly, both insurance and payment plans can be profitable for veterinary hospitals and a convenient and anxiety-reducing approach for pet owners.

Client engagement

While dealing with a pandemic is stressful and necessitates change, it is also a great opportunity to innovate. This includes re-thinking how we engage with clients, and how we articulate the value of our services. Clients have experienced new ways of dealing with their own physicians and the health care system and are bound to question why dealing with veterinary teams should be any different.

Expect that clients will have expectations when it comes to routine wellness visits, conditions that they believe could be handled virtually, preference for “curbside” services rather than coming into the hospital, home delivery of products, and much more. For a service industry such as veterinary medicine, it will be important to articulate the value proposition in ways that make sense to consumers. This is also a great opportunity to consider pet-specific care, in which we take a more pro-active and transparent approach to the care that pets will need over their lifetimes. It will also be important to curate resources used for client education, so we can be sure that pet owners are receiving consistent messaging about the care of their pets [1-5].

Summary

We will be emerging from a major health care and economic “shock”, but we won’t quickly see a return to practice as it used to be, so we need to be prepared and brace for the new normal. When these types of experiences arise, especially those with a global impact, we must adapt our practices, or the consequences could be dire.

While it might be frightening to think of changing aspects of practice with which we have grown comfortable over the years, even after the pandemic has completely passed, this remains an opportunity to re-consider our models for veterinary practice and how the “new normal” can encourage us to make changes for the better.

Acknowledgement

[© Lowell Ackerman 2020. No part of this material may be reproduced or copied in any manner without express written consent of author. Some of this material has been abstracted from Pet-Specific Care].

Bibliography

1. Ackerman L. “Pet-specific Care”. Wiley, [In press] (2021).
2. Ackerman L. “Why Should Veterinarians Consider Implementing Virtual Care?” *EC Veterinary Science* 4.4 (2019): 259-261.
3. Ackerman L. “An Introduction to Pet-specific Care”. *EC Veterinary Science* 4.1 (2019): 1-3.
4. Ackerman L. “Why Pet Health Insurance is Important for the Profession”. *EC Veterinary Science* ECO.02 (2019): 6-7.
5. Ackerman L. “Ready to partner with an online pharmacy?” *AAHA Trends* (2019): 49-53.

Volume 5 Issue 9 September 2020

©All rights reserved by Lowell Ackerman.