

Why Should Veterinarians Consider Implementing Virtual Care?

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Today's consumers want their health care on their own schedules, and at their own convenience. Since most have smart devices, they typically have access to online messaging, images, and even video, and are used to these devices playing a central role in their lives.

Telehealth (or Virtual Care) is the umbrella term used for health care consulting delivered remotely and can be sub-divided based on the parties involved in the consultation. Veterinarians providing telehealth must comply with all laws and regulations associated with their license to practice veterinary medicine. The standard of care is the same regardless of whether telemedicine or in-hospital care is provided. Telehealth has the potential to enhance animal care and the delivery of veterinary services, and regulations are evolving accordingly.

Telemedicine has had a place in veterinary medicine for decades, and yet recent changes in technology, and advances in human medicine, have changed the landscape in recent years. Regulatory changes, however, have not always kept pace. In many cases, telehealth requires a valid veterinarian-client-patient relationship (VCPR) and is subject to a variety of regulations.

The marketplace

Most demographic groups have embraced technology that allows instant gratification and Do-it-Yourself (DIY) applications. There is a growing trend among pet owners to access information online, purchase products online, encourage the monitoring of their pets with wearable technology, and to seek medical opinions online.

Pet owners want applications that allow them to be in contact with veterinary professionals at the time and medium of their choosing, even if veterinary practices have some qualms with this, may have concerns about the legalities of such actions, and have even more concerns about how to get compensated for such services.

Clients may attempt to contact veterinary hospitals by email or text (SMS), through social media and through online resources, including sending images and video; veterinary hospitals need to have a strategic plan for how to deal with such contact. Primary-care veterinarians may try to use the same strategies with specialists, hoping for insights without having to refer the patient, and are faced with the same limitations.

Professional considerations

Telemedicine consultations should only occur within a valid veterinarian-client-patient relationship; this is true regardless of whether the consultation occurs by telephone, email, or other medium. If it is allowed by a jurisdiction to create a virtual VCPR, it is still important to check with the appropriate authorities if prescribing is allowed under such a telehealth relationship. Veterinary hospitals should be careful not to inadvertently provide telemedicine to new or prospective clients, since there is legal liability when a legitimate veterinarian-client-patient relationship is absent.

Consultations with pet owners for which a VCPR has not been established are generally considered as either teleadvice or teletriage, rather than telemedicine. Both are still a subset of telehealth, even if they are not telemedicine. Teletriage might include providing advice for a pet that has consumed something toxic, or non-specific advice on how to deal with an emergency situation. There are also now a variety of applications for pets using wearables, including remotely measuring pulse, respirations, temperature, position, and activity level, and this also constitutes teletriage, but this typically happens within a sanctioned VCPR.

Implementation

Most veterinarians are already providing some forms of telehealth, but it is worthwhile to create hospital guidelines regarding the delivery of such services. It is also important to ensure that all aspects of the telehealth consultation are recorded appropriately in the medical records.

Other than teleconsultations, the most common forms of telehealth relate to things like provision of prescriptions based on VCPR, recheck evaluations, after-hours care, patient monitoring through wearable devices and other technologies, and even following up on hospice care patients and others for which in-hospital visits are not possible or not convenient.

Telehealth can be provided directly by a hospital (e.g. telephone, teleconferencing, email, etc.), but there are now several different companies, programs, platforms and applications that facilitate the interaction and monetization of the process.

Remote monitoring

Technology is now available that allows remote monitoring of pets, and this can be an important resource when considering virtual care. The most common forms of remote monitoring are wearable collars, but other options for remote monitoring include glucometers, blood pressure devices, Holter monitors and even sensors that can allow auscultation and other features.

Wearable collars with sensors are the most common form of remote monitoring. These collars can typically measure position (lying, sitting, standing), activity, pulse, respiration, and even heart rate variability. The measurements are generally collected continuously and in real time. For many of the devices, the veterinary healthcare team can access the information any time of the day or night through a cloud-based server.

There are many reasons why practices would choose to monitor pets remotely. For pets with existing medical issues, especially chronic problems, wearables allow measurements to be taken continuously and analyzed in real time regardless of the animal's location. For certain devices, systems can be set up to send alerts when specific thresholds are exceeded. This can alert the pet owner and the veterinary team when action is required, including bringing the pet in for a visit, or taking it to an emergency facility.

Expect that in the years ahead that remote monitoring will be an important part of pet-specific care, and clients will expect this option from veterinary teams.

Financial aspects of virtual care

Pricing for telehealth services will vary depending on how the telehealth service is to be integrated into the practice workstream, vendor-associated charges, and the costs associated with offering telehealth solutions.

Telehealth pricing can be included in pre-approved plans, but also priced in an à la carte fashion based on a time-based teleconsultation (either the length of the consultation, or how quickly the response is needed). As a variation on a bundled service, teleconsultation could also be subscription priced. The opportunities are only bounded by one's imagination and clients' requests for services.

Veterinarians may initially have some angst that offering telehealth services will cannibalize their office visits, but such fears are generally unfounded. In most cases, clients request virtual visits for assurances whether in-clinic visits are needed. In many situations, clients

will request telehealth consults so they have a better appreciation for what may be needed, but probably 70% or so of virtual care visits eventuate in the clients bringing their pet in to the clinic. If human telehealth is any indication, making access to health care more convenient triggers new use of medical services rather than a loss of doctor office visits.

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