

Chapter 1: Why bother with veterinary dentistry?

Veterinary dentistry is an exacting discipline, requiring skill, patience and special equipment. So one might reasonably ask, we should we bother?

The most important reason is that our patients need proper dental care to maximize both the quality and quantity of life. The second reason is that, by happy coincidence, veterinary dentistry can be quite profitable for the practice. Therefore, investments in equipment and training are rapidly recouped. So it makes very good medical sense as well as making good business sense.

The prevalence of treatable dental disease is staggering when you know what to look for and how to recognize lesions. Various sources indicate that 60 to 90 percent of adult dogs have periodontal disease to a degree that necessitates treatment. A similar proportion of the feline population is also affected. A study at the Animal Medical Centre found that of cats presented for dental cleaning, 65% had at least one 'neck lesion' requiring attention. There are also fractured and traumatized teeth, orthodontic problems, oral tumors and a number of other conditions waiting to be diagnosed.

There is Plenty of Dental Disease Just Waiting to be Diagnosed & Treated

Number Crunching (\$\$\$)

Charles Williams did a study at his clinic in Fairfax Virginia in 1984. Every animal that passed through his door, for whatever reason, got a thorough oral examination. He found that 44% of these animals needed immediate dental care for what could be considered dental emergencies.

In a clinic that has 10 animals crossing the threshold every weekday, there would be 4 or more needing immediate care. If only half of the clients consent to treatment, that would be two dental procedures each weekday (and that is just for the emergencies!). If the average bill for a dental procedure is \$300.00, that would be an extra \$600.00 dollars daily. If you do this five days a week for 50 weeks of the year, that would be:

$\$600.00 * 5 * 50 = \$150,000.00$ per year.

Maybe your clinic does not see 10 animals a day, but you should be charging far more than \$300.00 on average for a dental emergency case, when you add in anesthetic induction and maintenance, antibiotics and analgesics, ward care, pre-operative diagnostics, home care products and your time for a job very well done. Also, these numbers are just for the animals that have serious dental emergencies. There should be another large group benefiting from preventative treatment.

Keep in mind that not all dental emergencies are immediately apparent on a casual oral examination of the conscious patient. The vast majority of dental disease is going on below the gum line, hidden from view. One must be very familiar with normal anatomy and look for the subtle indicators of disease.

Providing proper dental care will mean an investment in some proper equipment. Fortunately, it is possible to set-up a very well equipped dental operator for under \$30,000.00. You can get started for under \$15000.00. When you look at an annual payback of \$150,000.00, you will see the benefit to your practice.

The Effects of Dental Disease on the Patient

Finances aside, the real reason for learning about and offering veterinary dental services is that your patients need proper dental care. We have looked at the prevalence of disease already. Now let's discuss how these diseases affect the animals.

As periodontal disease progresses, there is inflammation of the gingiva and surrounding tissues. This inflamed tissue, as well as being sensitive, bleeds easily. Bacteria and endotoxins in the plaque and calculus can thereby gain entry to the blood stream. Animals with periodontal disease suffer a constant shower of bacteria into their blood. The bacteria and their toxins will travel through the body and can cause disease far removed from the mouth. There have been numerous papers in both the human and veterinary literature drawing an association between oral infection and distant organ disease. Among the conditions associated with dental disease are cardiac disease, fertility problems, low birth weight babies and "old dog lung".

To maintain credibility, we must be careful about over stating this point. There has been no paper published proving that periodontal disease *causes* heart disease. All that has been shown is an *association* between the two conditions. It may actually be that the factors that make an individual susceptible to periodontal disease are the same factors that make them susceptible to cardiac disease. Some day, a direct cause-and-effect relationship may be found, but for now, we should pass on only what has been scientifically established, not what we *want* to believe.

By Providing Proper Dental Care, You Will Be Benefiting Your Patients and Your Practice.

In the later stages of periodontal disease, tooth mobility causes pain; the animal eats less and/or does not chew properly and so may become malnourished.

The bad breath that goes along with periodontal disease often causes a pet to be less acceptable to the owners. Affection and attention are withheld because people do not want to be near a pet that stinks. This can have serious psychological effects on a pet that was once loved.

Pets Feel Dental Pain in the Same Way and to The Same Degree as We Do.

A pet with a sore mouth, especially a dog, will often suffer from boredom, as they can no longer play with chew toys. Bear in mind that dogs use their mouths in much the same way that people use their hands. For a dog to have a non-functional mouth is a serious handicap.

Dental Pain in Dogs and Cats

Many dental conditions are acutely painful. Over time, this settles down to a dull, chronic pain, which can seriously affect a pet's quality of life and attitude. Articles in the Compendium on Continuing Education in January, February, May and June of 1991 pointed out that dogs and cats have the same pain tolerances and thresholds as humans. Therefore, a dog and cat feels dental pain in the same way and to the same degree as their owners. However, many clients will be skeptical when informed that their animal has a

painful oral condition. They will report that the pet is still eating and may still be playing with its toys as if nothing is wrong. This is actually not surprising when one stops to think about it.

Evolution has taught our pets to hide their pain. In the wild, an animal seen as being weak or distressed stands little chance of survival.

Dogs are pack animals – they live together in a cooperative society, but within that group, there is competition, with advantages bestowed on the top ranking animals. Therefore, animals at the top of the hierarchy want to stay there and animals lower down are looking for opportunities to move up or at least to maintain their position. Any sign of weakness is likely to bring a challenge from below and so there is an incentive to carry on as if nothing is wrong. An animal in great distress may be seen as a liability to the pack and so may be cast out to fend for itself. In short, complaining will bring no benefit and may invite problems. A dog's best strategy is to put up with the pain and act fit and healthy.

Cats are much less social, being solitary little predators. They are also prey to larger predators. Therefore, they also will try to look as fit and vigorous as possible, so as not to advertise themselves as an easy meal. Complaining does them no good and could do them harm.

If an animal has a sore tooth, that is one problem. If, as a result of the sore tooth, the animal stops eating it will become very hungry and so now it has two problems. Fasting is a poor survival strategy, and so rather than fasting, the animal eats, despite the pain. They may have to chew on one side of the mouth or eat without chewing much at all, but they will eat if at all possible.

Many humans will continue with their favorite activity despite injury. Runners will run with torn ligaments, tennis-players will play through tendonitis and so on. Many dogs are fanatical about their chewing and so will chew despite broken and infected teeth. Again, close observation may reveal that the animal is chewing on one side only or is avoiding the sore area.

Some dental conditions, such as tooth fracture, occur acutely. Others, such as periodontal disease develop gradually. Therefore, the pain comes on slowly, allowing the animal time to adapt and accommodate the pain. For many pets, the owners will simply report that the animal is slowing down as it is getting older. Though this is not a specific sign of dental disease, it is

reason to examine the pet carefully for the cause of its decline.

So whether the animal is showing obvious signs of oral pain or not, you can be confident that conditions that would cause pain in a human mouth will be causing pain in the pet's mouth. Pets do not always tell you when they are feeling poorly, but they will let you know when they are feeling better. Very often, when one rehabilitates a pet with a 'bad mouth', the owners will report a dramatic improvement in the pet's attitude and activity level. This last point is a bit anecdotal, but it has happened so often and consistently that I am very confident in saying that even if we do not increase the *quantity* of life with proper dental care, we absolutely will increase the *quality* of life.

Proper dental care will likely increase the quantity of life and will definitely improve the quality of life. Improper dental care will do neither.

So, with the benefits of proper preventative and therapeutic dental care understood, it must be clearly stated that proper dental care is no accident. It takes diligence, commitment and investment of time, effort and money. The rewards are great so read on.