JumpStart 98: **The rise of telemedicine**

*Please reference: By Terra Shastri, Director of Business Development & Strategic Initiatives with the Ontario Veterinary Medical Association*
Before practicing as a telemedicine veterinarian, Dr. Hannah Lau worked as an emergency and general practitioner veterinarian in California. When a job opportunity came up for her husband in their home state of Virginia over a year ago, they moved across the country. Dr. Lau missed her old hospital and team, so she spoke to them about offering telemedicine to their clients, which she could do from Virginia. Since April of this year alone, she’s completed more than 250 telemedicine consultations.

Remote consultations seemed like a natural progression for the clinic. Its website has a live chat function that’s always been popular, and the client service representatives (CSRs) who monitor the chats often have clients looking to schedule an appointment or wanting medical advice. When advice is warranted, the CSRs triage the questions to technicians, and in some cases, veterinarians.

The team of 30 veterinarians, shared between two locations, discussed how they could provide the highest quality medical care and ethical advice by using telemedicine. They also made lists of what they considered acceptable telemedicine issues (e.g. diarrhea but has appetite, mild ear issues, etc.) and issues that would require an in-clinic exam (e.g. cat can’t urinate, eye issues, etc.).

**How and what to charge**

When it comes to remote consultations, one of the biggest challenges for most is how to charge, especially if advice provided by phone consultations, email or text messaging has historically been provided to clients for free.

Dr. Lau recommends starting by making the distinction between what’s considered quick advice for a long-term client and what issues warrant a full consultation that should be charged. “We still provide tele-advice, but the CSRs are trained to know when a telemedicine consult needs to be scheduled,” says Dr. Lau. Ultimately, it’s still the veterinarian’s decision to charge. “Sometimes a client shouldn’t have been scheduled for a video consult because the pet really needed an in-clinic exam, so I don’t charge them,” she says.

In cases where the telemedicine consult is more extensive but still warrants the client having to bring their pet to the clinic, a recheck fee is charged. The exam usually takes less time because the patient’s history is in the file from the remote consult, while the client usually appreciates going into the clinic and feels confident that they made the right decision by bringing their pet in. Dr. Lau says they get new clients to understand the value and costs of virtual consultations, while grandfathering in the clients they’ve had for years. They tend to be more lenient when it comes to charging their long-time clients for advice given over the phone or via messaging.

Repackaging the way clients receive their vet visit through a video consult makes it easier to charge for the service. Some platforms allow clients to book a telemedicine consultation (based on predetermined doctor availability) directly on the clinic’s website, where they can also enter their credit card information. Dr. Lau says clients can book telemedicine appointments using the clinic’s online booking system, through live chat or by calling the clinic. At veterinary practices that use platforms such as Zoom or Skype, CSRs are responsible for scheduling the virtual consultation and taking the client’s credit card information over the phone.

At the practices where Dr. Lau works, they price the telemedicine consult as, “the least expensive way to see a doctor.” To keep the price point lower, they consider the time involved. “Our in-clinic exams are 30 minutes in length, but I’m able to conduct a thorough telemedicine consult in 20 minutes,” says Dr. Lau, which is why the practices charge about 40 per cent less than their regular in-clinic exam.

Like Dr. Lau, many practices charge less than their in-clinic exam fee because a virtual consult takes less time and there’s fewer overhead expenses like auxiliary staff, rent, etc. Dr. Lau still struggles when it comes to charging clients for virtual consultations. “I find it hard to assert value, but when I feel bad about charging, I think about the shortage of vet nurses (technicians)—those who can’t afford to go to school to upgrade—and how we need to make sure staff is earning a living wage.”

**Telemedicine going forward**

Long-term use of veterinary telemedicine is still questionable. Some clinic teams have embraced the technology and are using it to reduce barriers for clients who find it stressful bringing their pet to the clinic and to maximize the availability of appointments when limited by the number of exam rooms. There are valuable ways to continue using telemedicine post-pandemic.

Dr. Lau says telemedicine consults are a great service for clients who are ill, injured, elder or are living with disabilities, when their pets have applicable issues. Health-care plans include the necessary preventive care for pets over a 12-month period, and sometimes include a range of free office visits. Clinic teams could include telemedicine consultations instead of free office visits. Treatment plans for chronic issues requiring rechecks such as dermatological issues could also include a telemedicine component. Nutrition, behaviour, and hospice and palliative care are additional ways telemedicine can be used appropriately. Telemedicine can be a convenient solution for veterinarians and their clients, and it may become a service that clients expect.

Consumer behaviours change considerably over time. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused many people to experience using services they may not have before, such as online grocery shopping and virtual counselling sessions, as well as using video platforms for meetings or connecting socially. People got used to using technology, and some of these behaviours may continue.

Contrary to what some might believe, age isn’t a barrier when it comes to using this telemedicine technology. Dr. Lau says her telemedicine consults have been with the young and old. “I had a consult with a 75-year-old who was a total champ using the technology,” she says.

Dr. Lau says feedback from clients about telemedicine consultations has been extremely positive and she looks forward to continuing them. “The fact is, veterinarians have been using telemedicine for a long time with clients—they’re already doing it,” she says. “Now is the time to streamline, formalize and monetize the process of using telemedicine. We have to value our time and expertise, so our clients do too, whether that’s in the clinic or through telemedicine.”

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