**JumpStart: What We’ve Learned So Far During the Pandemic**

*Please reference: By Terra Shastri, Director of Business Development & Strategic Initiatives at the Ontario Veterinary Medical Association*

Shutdowns and increasing COVID numbers have forced veterinary hospitals to shift their delivery to curbside care, providing patients the care they needed and clients the service they expected. Through the better part of 2020, the pandemic has forced everyone, including veterinary hospitals, to re-evaluate how they conduct business as their organization’s strengths and weaknesses have been revealed. There are some important lessons learned so far within the profession.

**Promote other pathways for client communication**

With clients used to calling their veterinary clinic, it quickly became a challenge as the volume of phone calls increased substantially for front office staff. There were clinics who didn’t have enough phone lines to accommodate the volume for prescription refill requests, food pick up requests, non-medical questions, appointment requests, etc. Clinics that already had a web store for pet food could re-direct clients to order online, but this still took time. It became apparent that although a web store is a solution, clients need to be aware of it and have an account set up to use it for it to be effective in alleviating calls to the clinic.

Teams explored other options like live chat on their website, text messaging services, online appointment requests and promoting their email address to clients as a way of dealing with non-urgent inquiries. For teams who haven’t done so already, now is the time to figure out how to maintain a great client experience while making communication more efficient and less reliant on the phone.

**Veterinary roles and the delivery model can be different**

At the beginning of the pandemic, some veterinary clinics cut back on staff or split the team into two cohorts to help reduce risk exposure. In furloughing some front office staff, technicians and veterinarians had to do more with less time. “It wiped everyone out, and they realized this is a team game,” says Lambert. She sees the receptionist as a role that needs to become more dynamic, with the position becoming more involved by conducting pre-consultations and, “acting more like an air traffic controller.” The future of the veterinary team could potentially include three roles: patient care, technicians and veterinarians.

Evaluating efficiency in the patient visit process and questioning who on the team does what, is important when faced with the high volume of clients that clinics have been experiencing this year. “The veterinarian needs to see the clinically urgent caseload, and we have to realize that the most qualified person doesn’t need to be doing everything,” says Lambert.

For example, the introduction of telemedicine at some practices gave technicians and frontline staff the opportunity to conduct virtual pre-consultations where they collected information the veterinarian could use prior to their remote consultation. This allows veterinarians to conduct more consultations that require less time.

**Mental health and well-being supports are crucial**

A crisis such as COVID-19 doesn’t always bring out the best in people, clients included. With clinic teams reporting abuse from clients over the phone, in-person and online, already exhausted staff often felt defeated. While both clients and staff were experiencing stress brought on by the uncertainty of the pandemic, staff also had to manage the emotions of clients, which became a burden they carried home with them after a long workday. Clinic teams have been run off their feet adjusting to this new way of doing things, and their mental health and well-being need to be a priority so this new normal can be sustainable. Although physical distancing and mask wearing are necessary on teams, it’s important for people to share how they’re feeling so they can feel less alone. There are many free supports available online (i-matter.ca/get-support) in addition to OVMA’s Employee and Family Assistance Program (ovma.org/veterinarians/your-wellbeing/MAP).

Mental health and well-being continue to be a challenge in the profession, and the pandemic has amplified it. Leading by example, exercising empathy, and sharing your own struggles can helps to open up the conversation while reducing the stigma. For more veterinary specific resources, please go to i-matter.ca or follow along at OVMA\_I\_Matter on Instagram and/or Facebook.

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