Round Table Discussion

The Art of Client Compliance

As veterinarians, we try to recommend the best medical treatment for our patients, regardless of their species—dog, cat, bird, bunny, or lizard. However, our best advice is not enough to ensure the wellness of our patients if their owners do not follow our instructions for their pet's care at home. Sometimes, no matter what recommendations we make at the hospital, no matter how many times we show owners how to medicate their pets, and no matter how often we call owners to see how their pets are doing at home, owners do not follow through with our instructions. This situation is particularly frustrating to us veterinarians when owners who have not followed our advice return to the clinic to complain that their pet is not better.

How do we get pet owners to listen to us and follow through? Enforcing client compliance is an art. Each veterinarian, through his or her own experiences, develops a unique style or certain tricks to convince clients of the importance of following through with home care instructions. In this round table, 4 avian practitioners will share with us their tips for enforcing client compliance. The round table participants are Alexandra Adamcak, DVM, Dipl ABVP (Avian), All Creatures Animal Hospital, East Amherst, NY, USA; Sue Chen, DVM, Gulf Coast Avian & Exotics, Houston, TX, USA; Carol Gamez, DVM, Georgetown Veterinary Hospital, Georgetown, CT, USA; and Sally Haddock, DVM, St Marks Veterinary Hospital, New York, NY, USA.

I hope this discussion will make each of you think about your own methods of getting clients to pay attention to your advice and will perhaps give you some new ideas about how to get clients to follow through.

Laurie Hess, DVM, Dipl ABVP (Avian)
Associate Editor

Question: What do you think are the most effective means of achieving good client compliance: in-person discussions, client handouts, telephone calls, e-mail, or some other method of communication?

Dr Adamcak:

In-person discussions are the best; you usually have the client’s full attention, as they are in the office to solve a problem. I find following up with a handout is a great way to reinforce our discussion. Telephone calls are difficult because leaving messages, trying to talk between appointments, calling after hours, etc all can be inconvenient. Email is a much better way to communicate new information between doctor and client.

Dr Chen:

Because owners can get overwhelmed when discussing their pet’s illness and treatments, I try to provide typewritten discharge instructions, especially for patients that have been hospitalized or have more extensive and complicated home care requirements. Discharge instructions are given to the owner when they come to pick up their pet, so they have an opportunity to read them before their pet is brought to them. Then my staff or I go over the discharge instructions again and answer any questions that the client may have after we’ve bought their pet to them. For especially critical patients, I have my staff call the owner 2 to 3 days after discharge to see how the pet and owner are doing.

Dr Gamez:

In our practice, clients tend to respond best to phone calls. They often thank the technician for the call and will schedule a follow-up appointment right then and there. Handouts help, but they don’t actually get clients to make follow-up appointments.

Dr Haddock:

Definitely, in-person discussions that are not rushed are most important! I like to repeat new information 2–3 times to the client. New material is very hard for clients to absorb, especially if it is upsetting information. We like to send clients home with handouts specifically tailored to their pet’s ailment (ie, psittacosis), as well as general feeding, behavior training, and husbandry handouts. I commonly set aside charts of sick birds, so I can follow up from day to day during their intense recovery period. Sometimes, I will put a note in the computer to have a technician make a follow-up phone call a few days later if the pet is stable.