

PLAYING WITH A HALF-DECK: STRATEGIES TO MANAGE CLIENT FINANCIAL CONSTRAINTS

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Objectives:

- Recognize that financial limitations constrain the practice of veterinary medicine on a daily basis.
- Recognize that financial constraints may challenge the veterinarian-client-patient relationship and contribute to compassion fatigue.
- Strategize how to make use of Calgary-Cambridge communication skills to more effectively work with veterinary clients who express financial concerns.

AS A PROFESSION, WE UNDERSTAND THE REALITIES OF FINANCIAL HARDSHIP

Many of us face significant educational debt at the time of graduation. Approximately 1/5 of veterinarians owe more than \$200,000 in educational debt.(1) This is more than double the starting salary of most new graduates, and educational debt continues to grow at a rate faster than veterinary salaries increase.(1, 2)

Because of educational debt, most new graduates have student loans. These monthly payments represent a large part of salaries, and may detract from the quality of life that graduates envisioned.(3)

Our profession is acutely aware that finances drive lifestyle in terms of what one can and cannot afford. Healthcare is expensive. Even we, as veterinarians, cannot always afford healthcare for our pets at the level that we might desire. Most of us can relate to our clients' financial constraints because we ourselves have felt the pressures of our own pocketbook.

TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCES HAVE PAVED THE WAY FOR GOLD STANDARD CARE

New graduates are trained to offer gold standard care to every patient. Gold standard care aims to:

- increase the speed and accuracy of diagnosis
- improve medical and/or surgical management of the patient's underlying condition
- address secondary concerns
- hasten resolution of clinical signs
- improve quality of life
- lengthen survival times

With each technological advance in medicine, the bar is raised. Gold standard care is becoming increasingly difficult for clients to finance.

Veterinarians are naturals when it comes to prioritizing patient care. In an ideal world, the gold standard is always possible. However, is it financially feasible for every patient and every client?

THE COST OF CARE

Today's pet owners often say "do everything" and "spare no expense", yet the reality is that most clients are keenly aware of price.(4-7) Clients expect the veterinary team to initiate conversations about cost.(4, 8) Because clients do not always understand the value of the services provided, the burden falls upon us to explain value and to justify it in line-items on estimates.(4, 7, 9-13)

What happens when the cost of care exceeds the client's ability or willingness to afford it?

STRATEGIES FOR FINANCING CARE

Veterinarians often feel badly about charging for their services; however, veterinary practices cannot survive without payment for services rendered. Options for financing care include: (14-16)

- Establishing wellness plans within individual veterinary practices
- Tailoring the minimum database to the patient to, in effect, stage the diagnosis
- Offering in-house payment plans
- Accepting third-party payments
- Promoting pet health insurance
- Establishing a charity fund
- Considering euthanasia as a realistic treatment option
- Refusing clients, particularly when the patient is not in critical condition

This presentation will flush out these topics in greater detail as well as highlight how each strategy may be addressed with tactful communication skills.

The goal is to preserve the veterinarian-client-patient relationship while managing the cost of care so that care is tailored to the patient, in the order of priority, based upon what the client can afford.

Medical management rarely has to be all-or-none.

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