



Talking with clients about money

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Studies have shown that one of the top reasons for burnout for veterinarians working in private general practice is the anxiety caused by talking about money and the rejection caused by clients' economic limitation.

As a service-based profession with fees for services performed, veterinary medicine largely depends on clients' discretionary spending. A recent CHOICE survey found that more than half of cat and dog owners are prepared to pay up to \$2,500 for treatment if their pet has a life-threatening illness. However, many will use private savings or loans to finance this, with only 30% of dog owners and 21% of cat owners reporting they have pet insurance.

Negative consequences can occur when a pet owner declines a treatment recommendation. These

include a lack of pet care or negative welfare impacts for the animal, the loss of income to the veterinary practice and the emotional toll on the recommending veterinarian or nurse. Most vets and nurses entered the profession to help animals, people, or both, and declined recommendations, especially if repeated over time can create anxiety and feelings of unease and lack of worth.

There are almost 29 million pets in Australia today – more than the estimated human population of 25 million. With Australian pet ownership at an all-time high, here are some suggestions to help discuss treatment costs with clients.

Involve clients in the decision-making process

Discuss what the patient needs with the owner to create a level of confidence and an understanding

of the significance of the treatment to be provided. Estimates are vital in helping establish this. Healthcare plans with treatment details and costs are helpful, so make sure to talk through the treatment and costs.

Positive and confident body language is essential when discussing treatment plans, and also when ultimately collecting the bill. Practised scripts or talking points can be handy in this area and can help the entire practice provide clarity to the clients and stay on message.

Communicate the value to the pet

When presenting a treatment plan, focus on the 'why' and the 'what' of the procedure to be performed before concentrating on the costs. When hesitation is sensed – is it because of the risk of the procedure?

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The prognosis for a positive outcome?
The value placed on the pet in the family hierarchy? The costs of care?

Generally, clients welcome conversations about the cost of care. While they won't always say "yes" to recommendations, you can improve the chances by better communicating the value to the pet.

Offer options to assist the cost of veterinary care

Work out what is best for your practice and clients and be ready to discuss if needed. Options can include pet insurance or third-party payment options.

Educate your clients

Educate clients on diseases, risk, preventative health care and general husbandry at every visit, so they feel they are getting value for money.

Discuss pet insurance

There are many opportunities to talk with clients about pet insurance. When animals are young, it is easy to discuss particular health risks they may face due to breed or location. However, there are multiple other opportunities as animals age, too. When checking a client in, ask if their pet has pet insurance. When performing a physical exam, consider why pet insurance would benefit that animal specifically and share your thoughts. At discharge time/ the front desk, ask the client if they have any pet insurance claim forms that need to be completed. It can be helpful to have one or two providers you have researched and are ready to recommend.

The combination of detailed healthcare/treatment plans, good communication focusing on value to the pet, the use of third-party payment options if needed, open discussions about pet insurance and a well-practised team are all positive steps your practice can take when discussing treatment costs.

Together, these suggestions can help to give patients the level of care they deserve, your clients the peace of mind that their pets will be given the care they need and help your practice gain a reputation as a caring and compassionate hospital.

This article is for general information only.

