Communicating with Clients at Patient Discharge

Communication is the key to interacting well with clients in a veterinary practice. Veterinarians, RVTs, veterinary assistants, and other staff are partners in this communication. Patient discharge is a crucial time in which good client communication skills may be put to the test. If your veterinarian asks you to discuss a case with a client at discharge, here are some tips to keep in mind.

The staff member reviewing the veterinary services provided should be very familiar with the case — the treatment plan and any diagnostics, surgery, medications, homecare instructions, etc. Time and effort at patient discharge can vary greatly depending on the nature of the visit. More extensive medical or surgical cases may require lengthy reviews of discharge instructions when a client comes to pick up their pet.

The veterinarian makes the diagnosis, develops the treatment plan and communicates with clients about any surgical or medical procedures. Staff members act as the veterinarian’s representative when reviewing these discharge instructions with clients and should not alter them. Similarly, staff should be careful not to diagnose, give a prognosis or guarantee an outcome, even with offhand comments like, “It could be …” or “I’m sure he’ll be just fine.”

During discharge, explain to the client what treatments and procedures were performed. Review the most important points, including the doctor’s diagnosis and the treatment plan. Reinforce the value of what the veterinarian has done on behalf of the patient’s health and answer any questions; don’t hesitate to ask the veterinarian for help if you don’t know the answer to a question or feel uncomfortable answering certain questions.

Then go over follow-up care, prescribed medications and supplies. Explain why the medication is being prescribed. Be sure that the client understands the route of administration of the medication, how much to give, and how often to give it. Demonstrate for the client how to administer the medication and provide any tips on medicating. If appropriate, have the client demonstrate how to give the medication with a placebo.

Finally, if a client is responsible for ongoing medical or post-surgical management (such as wound care, bandage changes, or catheter maintenance), review the tasks that they will be required to perform. Point out anything that the client should look for and provide contact information should they have concerns. Ask the client if he or she has any further questions and take the time to address them.

Frequently, it is easier to have a discharge-related conversation without the client’s animal in the room until it is time to demonstrate the administration of medication and other procedures the client is asked to perform. Then conclude the appointment by assisting clients with animal handling, providing leashes or carriers as needed, and offering to assist them out if they are carrying a bag of food, medicines, or other items.