This is the first article in our Practical Dentistry series, which will present various ways of increasing revenue through offering dental services in the general veterinary practice.

**Dental Services: Good Medicine for Patients & Practices**

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This series will present techniques and procedures that require minimal expense, effort, and training, yet have proven to be invaluable in many practices (general and referral). All of the information and procedures discussed promote good medicine and, therefore, are highly beneficial for the patient as well as the practice.

**Why Is Marketing Dental Services Important?**

**Common Disease with Significant Repercussions**

Oral disease is one of the most common diseases in veterinary medicine, but clinical signs are generally subtle or absent. Patients with dental disease are often in pain despite lack of clinical signs. In addition, many oral disease processes cause significant localized and systemic medical problems.

**Lack of Knowledge = Undertreatment**

The general public and veterinary field’s lack of knowledge about dentistry is dramatic. This results in patients being undertreated. Providing proper dental therapy to more patients is good medicine for pets and good business for the practice.

**Happy Patients & Clients**

A healthy mouth makes a big difference in the health and attitude of your patients. By increasing the pet’s demeanor and quality of life, you will strengthen your relationship with the client.

**Loss of Traditional Veterinary Revenue**

Over the last decade or so, there has been a significant loss of traditional veterinary revenue streams due to many factors, including improved knowledge and outside competition.

- **Vaccines**: Some immunologists do not feel that annual vaccines are needed. While there is still

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**WHAT DO THE NUMBERS TELL US?**

**Dogs**

- 80% over 2 years of age have periodontal disease
- 25% (conservative estimate) have uncomplicated crown fractures
- 10% have fractured teeth with pulp exposure (complicated crown fractures)
- 5% have other dental conditions, such as neoplasia, orthodontic problems, and caries

**Cats**

- 70% have periodontal disease
- 40% have tooth resorption
- 10% have other dental conditions, including tooth fractures

Learn more about complicated versus uncomplicated crown fractures by reading Dr. Niemiec’s article *Diagnosis & Treatment of Crown Fractures* (Today’s Veterinary Practice, July/August 2011, page 18), available at todaysveterinarypractice.com, or by viewing an educational video at dogbeachdentistry.com
controversy associated with this topic, it has impacted practice income. Better client education on the importance of regular health examinations and wellness assessments, including dental services, can offset changes in vaccination protocols.

- **Online pharmacies**: With the increasing popularity of online pharmacies, significant income is lost from prescription revenue. This trend started with flea control and heartworm prevention products, but now more commonly affects all veterinary prescriptions.

- **Internet reliance**: Increased reliance on the Internet and other sources decreases client trips to the clinic.

### How to Increase Dental Revenue

There are 4 components that help improve income generated from dental services:

1. Increase number of dental procedures performed
2. Increase number of dental service options
3. Improve pre-operative testing protocols
4. Provide superior intra-operative and postoperative care.

All these components are synergistic; therefore, by increasing 2 or more, an exponential improvement occurs.

#### 1 Increase number of dental procedures performed.

This is the most important of the 4 methods and the quickest way to increase revenue. There are several ways to increase your procedure numbers, but the first and foremost is education.

- **Client Education**: If your dental examination and recommendations consist of glancing in the mouth and saying, “Yes, he needs a dental,” you are not going to do many dental procedures.

  - The most successful client education comes from the entire staff, including veterinarians, technicians, assistants, and especially receptionists.

  - The best way for practice owners/managers to get the entire staff on board is to educate the staff and then provide incentives to encourage them to market dental procedures (see Dental Marketing Incentive Plans, page 41).

  - The receptionists, technicians, assistants, and veterinarians should all be well versed in what a complete dental prophylaxis entails, how it benefits the patient, and how to effectively communicate this information to clients.

  - See Educational Resources for Veterinary Professionals & Clients, page 42, for websites, continuing education opportunities, and reading materials that will provide insightful information.

  - Client education should start with existing clients, but then expand to educating the local population of pet owners. There are numerous methods to provide this education, including:

    - Personal communication from the practice’s staff
    - Handouts/books (Figure 1)
    - Websites of veterinary dentists
    - Your own practice website
    - Practice newsletter or magazine articles.

- **Superior equipment**: Once the marketing plan is underway and the dental schedule is filling up, superior equipment will speed procedures and increase efficiency.

  - Old, dull, or damaged equipment not only creates the potential for injury, but is far less effective (Figure 2). For example, damage to the last 1 mm of an ultrasonic scaler tip renders it 25% less efficient, and 2 mm loss results in 50% less efficiency.\(^\text{13}\)

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**Figure 1.** Excerpts from books, journals, and other materials can be used for education; however, permission must be requested from the publisher. This page is from Small Animal Dental, Oral and Maxillofacial Disease: A Color Handbook, Niemiec BA (ed). London: Manson Publishing, 2010.

**Figure 2.** Examples of poorly maintained and damaged equipment: using equipment in this condition will prolong procedures, increase replacement costs, and potentially harm patients. Courtesy Dr. Jerzy Gawor
• A new drill, ultrasonic scaler, elevator, or curette can markedly cut down on surgical time and increase the number of procedures performed each day. This minor investment can make a big difference.
• It is important to note that (1) time is money and (2) decreased anesthetic times are better for patients. If a practice can do 1 more procedure a day, 5 days a week, at an average retail cost of $400, the practice makes an additional $8000 a month. This can easily cover many upgrades in dental equipment.

Equipment care & maintenance: Dental equipment must receive proper care. Quality maintenance improves efficiency, increases lifespan of the equipment, and maximizes your investment. Technicians/assistants should properly maintain power equipment, which includes:
• Oiling handpieces and maintaining compressor oil if necessary
• Care and sharpening of hand instruments, which is critical but often poorly performed, if at all. Hand scalers should be sharpened at least weekly; daily is ideal.
• Maintaining and sharpening elevators, scissors, etc
• Cleaning, drying, and sterilizing dental instruments (Figure 3).

Continuing education/training: Most veterinarians and technicians do not receive enough dental training. In addition, dental techniques and equipment options change and advance at a rapid pace.
• Ideally, training is attained via hands-on wetlabs (Figure 4). This will benefit the patient, practice, and staff (see Educational Resources for Veterinary Professionals & Clients).
• By learning new techniques, veterinarians and technicians will perform high-quality dental procedures in less time.
Increase number of dental service options.

Increasing the number of dental service options is one of the easiest ways to increase your clinic’s dental service revenue. The most efficient way to do this is to offer superior basic care, which should include:

- Dental radiology (Figure 5)
- Root planing/application of antibiotic gels (Doxirobe, pfizer.com)
- Regional anesthesia (nerve blocks) (Figure 6)
- Proper pain management (opiates, nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs [NSAIDs], morphine/lidocaine/ketamine mixture [MiLK])
- Bonded sealant agents.

Dental radiology: With regard to dental services, dental radiology provides the greatest return on investment.

- Professional radiology reviews (by a board-certified dentist) will help increase the number of dental treatments performed because the specialist will be able to determine if any pathology is present that requires treatment.
- Due to the large variations in cost and quality of dental radiology systems, prepurchase consults with equipment manufacturers are recommended in order to help the practitioner decide what system is best for the practice.

Complex procedures: I do not recommend that general practitioners perform more difficult procedures, such as root canals, jaw fracture repair, and major oral surgery. Patients should be referred to a dental specialist that has the experience required for successful outcomes. In addition, more income can be generated, with less stress and expense, by spending that time performing office calls and other typical procedures.

Improve pre-operative testing protocols.

This step improves the safety of each procedure and increases the practice’s revenue:

- Complete blood panel: Renal and hepatic indices, CBC, and thyroxine testing
- Urinalysis: Especially useful for assessing slightly elevated renal indices in cats by concurrently evaluating urine specific gravity
- Chest radiographs: More than 50% of patients > 6 years of age have significant findings on chest films; in addition, hypertrophic cardiomyopathy is often not ausculted.

Provide superior intra-operative and postoperative care.

- Temperature maintenance: Circulating warm-water or warm-air blankets (eg, Bair Huggers, arizant.com) (Figure 7)
- Monitoring: Blood pressure measurement, electrocardiogram, carbon dioxide monitoring, etc
- IV fluid administration for hydration support and medication administration

Provide superior postoperative treatment:

- Pain management: Opiates, NSAIDS, local anesthetics, acupuncture, etc
- At-home care: Oral cleansing formulas (eg, MAXI/GUARD, addisonlabs.com), plaque prevention (eg, OraVet, pfizer.com), dental home care kits
- Follow-up appointments and regular dental care

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DENTAL MARKETING INCENTIVE PLAN

Incentives are a great way to get the entire practice staff on board with a marketing program. Financial rewards improve staff morale and camaraderie by setting a common goal that motivates employees both individually and as a team.

Step 1: Establish the revenue increase goal; 20% to 25% is a good goal.

Step 2: Set time frame for the program: 6 months works well. Any shorter is not enough time to establish the program and any longer may endanger staff motivation.

Step 3: Determine the net revenue from dental services. For most practices, this is approximately 50% of the gross gain from dental services.

Step 4: Calculate the amount of revenue that will be generated during the incentive period: If dental services generated $100,000 during the first 6 months of 2011 and you want to increase that by 20%, dental services will need to generate $120,000 during the first 6 months of 2012.

Step 5: Take a percentage of the increased revenue (in this case, 50% or $10,000) and give it to the staff. This could be in the form of a cash bonus or trip (perhaps one that is combined with a continuing education opportunity).

Step 6: Post a chart tracking dental revenue increases so the entire staff can follow the practice’s progress.

While you will not be collecting any extra income the first 6 months of 2012, you will have changed the entire staffs’ motivation, leading to long-term increased income.
Dentistry is an area of veterinary medicine that offers incredible potential to improve both patient health and clinic revenue. Just by performing proper and thorough dental work, practitioners can greatly increase the overall health of their patients as well as their dental income. A win–win situation for all involved.

**MILK** = morphine/lidocaine/ketamine;
**NSAID** = nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug(s)

**References**

10. Personal experience of the author
14. Huffman LJ. Oral examination. In Niemiec BA (ed): Small Animal Dental Specialties, with many other educational activities. In addition, the website provides a calendar of continuing education opportunities.

The author is affiliated with the following continuing education opportunities:

- **Santa Barbara Veterinary Conference (sbvdtc.com):** Annual conference that provides continuing education, including hands-on wetlabs, with a focus on keeping groups small to maximize learning
- **San Diego Veterinary Dental Training Center (vetdentaltraining.com):** Continuing education classes that are held throughout the year in San Diego and split into groups by experience level

**Books**


**EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES FOR VETERINARY PROFESSIONALS & CLIENTS**

**Websites**
The following websites provide an extensive repertoire of information and educational materials for both veterinary staff and pet owners:

- **American Veterinary Dental College:** avdc.org
- **American Veterinary Dental Society:** avds-online.org
- **Southern California Veterinary Dental Specialties:** dogbeachdentistry.com
- **VetDentalRad.com:**
- **beachdentistry.com**
- **American Veterinary Dental Forum (veterinarydentalforum.com):** Annual conference that provides continuing education, including hands-on wetlabs, exhibit hall, and many other educational activities. In addition, the website provides a calendar of continuing education opportunities.

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**ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF DENTAL CARE**

Dental care not only improves the overall health of pets but also has economic benefits. By addressing dental issues early, veterinarians can prevent future complications and reduce the need for more invasive procedures. This can save owners time and money in the long run.

**The Benefits**

- **Preventive care:** Dental care can prevent the need for more invasive procedures, saving owners money.
- **Reduced visits:** Addressing dental issues early can reduce the need for future anesthetics and other procedures.
- **Improved quality of life:** Proper dental care can increase the comfort and quality of life for pets.

**The Costs**

- **Initial treatment:** Dental treatments can be costly, especially if extensive procedures are needed.
- **Long-term care:** Regular dental care can help prevent future issues and reduce costs associated with more severe dental problems.

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