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Today's Veterinary Business

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INSIDE

OCTOBER/NOVEMBER 2025

VIEWPOINTS: OUR INDUSTRY'S SILENT HEALTH CRISIS **P8**

READER Q&A: NEW HIRES, EMPATHY AND PRIVACY **P16**

A Good Goodbye

Veterinary teams are redefining the euthanasia experience for the better. P42



PLUS

INNOVATION STATION: AGENTIC AI **P24**

20 QUESTIONS: JON AYERS **P72**

ANDY ROARK: THE PATH TO GREATNESS **P84**

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Contents

VOLUME 9, ISSUE 5

OCTOBER/NOVEMBER 2025

4 **Editor's Letter**
8 **Viewpoints**
12 **News Briefs**
16 **OPENING SHOTS: Q&A**
BY ERNIE WARD, DVM, CVFT

BUSINESS

18 **LEGAL LINGO**
You, Your Legacy and Your Practice's Future
BY PETER H. TANELLA, ESQ., AND JASON E. MARX, ESQ.

24 **INNOVATION STATION**
What Agentic AI Can Do for You
BY NIKHIL TALGERI, MS

28 **POLITICS & POLICY**
A Year to Remember (and Forget)
BY MARK CUSHING, JD

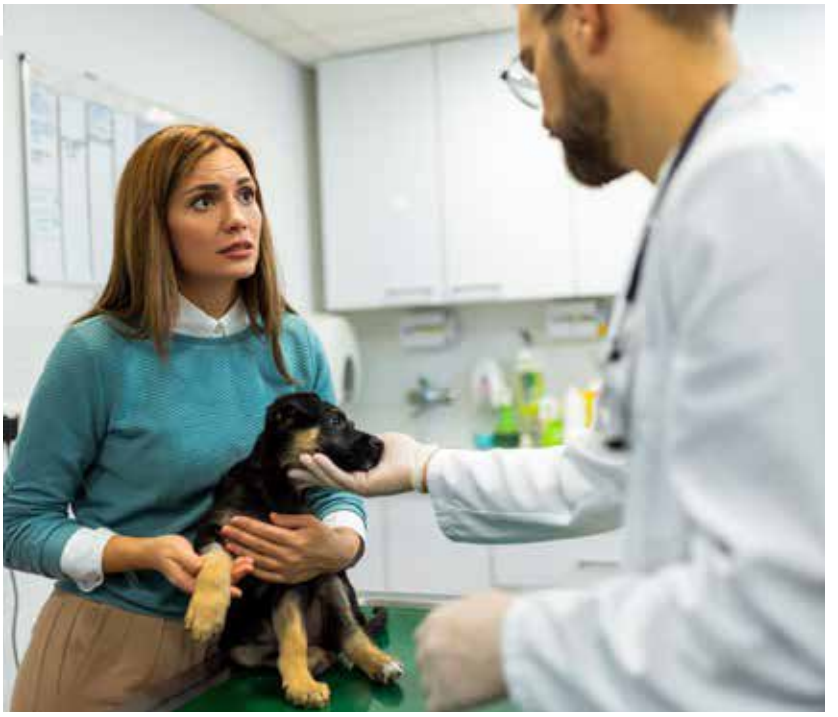
30 **MONEY MATTERS**
Plan Your Taxes Now to Avoid April Surprise
BY JASON CASTNER, CPA, CVA

32 **EMBRACING ENTREPRENEURSHIP**
Who's on Your Success Team?
BY PETER WEINSTEIN, DVM, MBA

36 **PROTECT & DEFEND**
9 Questions to Ask Your Insurance Agent
BY BILL BUTLER, CIC, CISR, CWCA

38 **CREATIVE DISRUPTION**
Make Secondary Care Second Nature
BY BOB LESTER, DVM

40 **PRACTICE SMARTER**
How to Level Up Your Team
BY MIRA JOHNSON, CPA, CVPM, MBA



FEATURES

42
A Good Goodbye
BY ANGELA BEAL, DVM, FFCP
Veterinary teams should focus on the entire euthanasia experience — from scheduling and preparation to aftercare options and follow-up communication — to ensure a peaceful passing and positive memories.

48
Improving Client Service: The Perception vs. Reality
BY LOUISE S. DUNN
Free CE: Bridging the client service gap is essential, not only to strengthen pet owner relationships but also to ensure better patient outcomes and business sustainability.

52
Creating an Eco-Friendly Veterinary Practice
BY JENNY ALONGE, DVM
By adopting environmentally sustainable strategies, veterinary professionals can reduce ecological harm, safeguard public health and ensure a healthier future for all.

Contents

OCTOBER/NOVEMBER 2025



LEADERSHIP

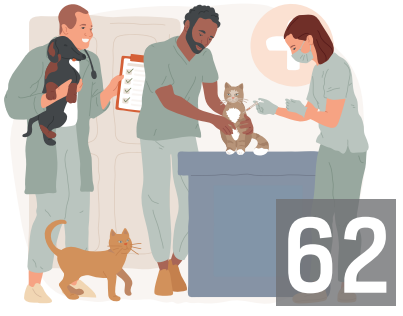
56 LET'S TALK DRUGS
How to Clean Up Compliance Problems
BY KELLEY DETWEILER

60 TALK THE TALK
Getting A+ Service From Gen Z Employees
BY AMANDA L. DONNELLY, DVM, MBA

62 TAKE CHARGE
Making Patient Care Sustainably Affordable
BY HEATHER PRENDERGAST, RVT, CVPM, SPHR

64 TALENT TERRITORY
Recruitment's Impact on Your Bottom Line
BY STACY PURSELL, CPC, CERS

66 HR HUDDLE
When Are Employee Name Changes Valid?
BY KELLIE G. OLAH, SPHR, CVPM, SHRM-SCP



COMMUNITY

68 OFF THE RECORD
Why General Practice Is the Real Residency
BY STACEE SANTI, DVM

72 20 QUESTIONS
From One Mission to Another
BY DEBORAH A. STONE, MBA, PH.D., CVPM

76 FEARLESS
Is the Fear of Success Holding You Back?
BY NATALIE L. MARKS, DVM, CVJ, CCFP, ELITE FFCP-V

80 FINANCIAL WELLNESS
Updating Your Clinic's Retirement Plan
BY GEOFF S. HUBER, CFP, CHFC, CLU, CKA, AND FRITZ WOOD

82 SOCIALLY ACCEPTABLE
When to Get Personal on Social Media
BY CAITLIN DEWILDE, DVM

DISCHARGE NOTES

84 The Path to Greatness
BY ANDY ROARK, DVM

ON THE COVER
Illustration by Bee Johnson



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Vocalized at VIS

The 2025 Veterinary Innovation Summit has come and gone, but what was said in Kansas City in early September will echo for a while. Whether it was a thought-provoking line from keynote speaker Dave deBronkart ("e-Patient Dave") or a tell-it-like-it-is statement from Dr. Beth Venit of the American Association of Veterinary State Boards, attendees got their fill of insight and advice during the three-day event. Here are a few sound bites, relayed verbatim.

- **Dr. Matt Salois, Veterinary Management Groups CEO and former AVMA economics guru, on the push for midlevel professionals in veterinary medicine:** "The U.S. health system has relied on midlevels for decades, yet costs continue to rise and productivity remains elusive. Copying that model in veterinary medicine ignores both history and economics."
- **Animal Policy Group founder Mark Cushing on the same topic:** "The marketplace spoke up in one state. (Colorado) voters and pet owners said, 'We need more care, and we need more care that's accessible, and this will help.'"
- **Vetsource Vice President Sheri Gilmartin on 2025 trends:** "The top 25% of patients make up 51% of visits and 65% of revenue."
- **MyBalto Foundation CEO Dr. Robert Parkins on technology:** "The nice thing about technology is it is leveling the playing field for everyone. Now you, as an individual practice, can be faster, you can have your AI notes, you can have a pharmacy that does compounding for you. You don't need to be part of a corporate group to do so."
- **Keynote speaker and self-described nurse economist Shawna Butler on artificial intelligence:** "I hear this all the time: 'AI is going to replace me.' It's not, it's not. It's a tool to help you do your jobs better, to do the things that really, really, really matter. It's not going to replace any clinician. It's just going to replace the things that clinicians shouldn't be doing."
- **Nationwide Pet chief veterinary officer Dr. Emily Tincher on leveraging team members:** "Practices that have a greater than 1-to-3 vet-to-technician ratio are more profitable. They, per doctor, bring in more revenue."
- **Emancipet CEO Cheryl Katon on low-cost veterinary clinics:** "There is a stigma around nonprofits. (At Emancipet), our incident rates are lower than industry standards. The training is pretty rigorous for all our new doctors. Nonprofit does not mean low quality by any stretch."

Ken Niedziela

Ken Niedziela, Editor

Today's Veterinary Business

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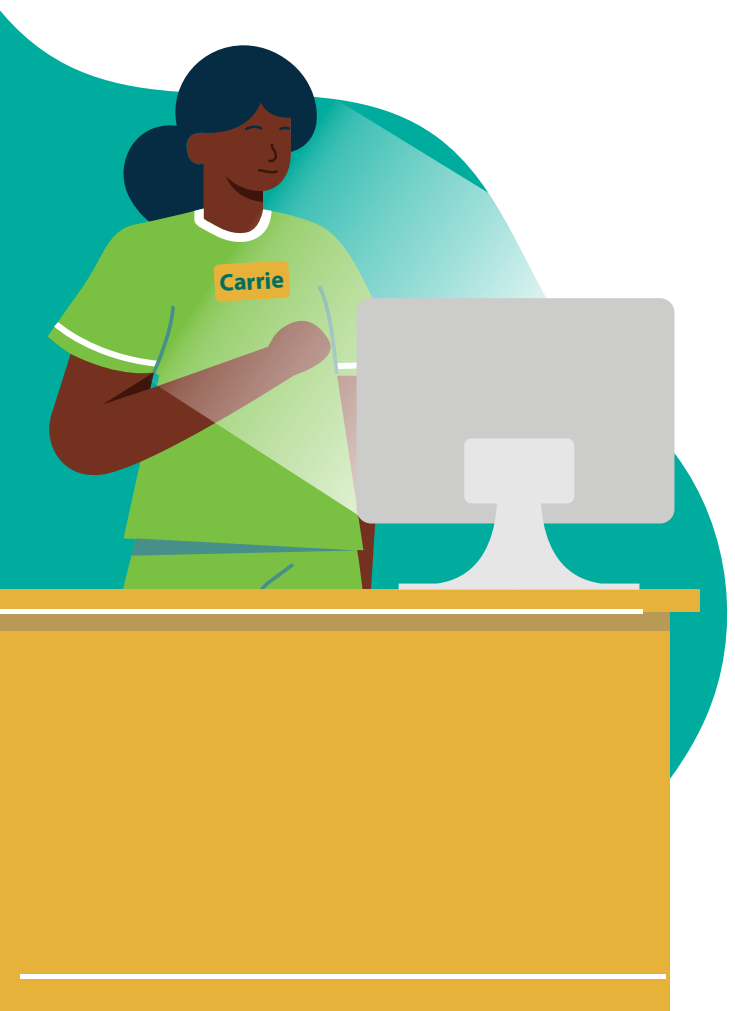
A Day in the Life

How CareCredit helps a veterinary practice streamline its workflows with a single solution

Are days at your practice so busy that sometimes it can feel like you're chasing your own tail?

You're not alone.

Meet Carrie, a local veterinary practice manager focused on providing excellent client service while also running the day-to-day operations of a fast-paced practice. By using CareCredit credit card features built directly into her practice management software, she has turned juggling into streamlining. That's because everything she needs to complete financing tasks and daily to-dos is in one platform, helping her save valuable time so she can focus on what matters most—supporting people and their pets.



Let's get started!

Here's how Carrie is MAXimizing the integration throughout her day.



12:45 p.m.

A client arrives for an afternoon appointment but becomes visibly anxious after seeing the associated costs. Carrie reminds them they can use flexible financing with CareCredit and uses the fast and secure account lookup feature to access the client's card information. After Carrie finds what she needs almost instantly, her client feels relieved.

3:00 p.m.

Carrie teaches Sarah, a new team member in charge of taking payments, how to use CareCredit features in their software. Carrie walks her through a quick demo, showing her how to quickly and easily process a CareCredit payment and how to send an application link to a client at home or in the office. Sarah is trained and ready in no time.



CareCredit
a Synchrony solution



8:30 a.m.

To start the day, Carrie is greeted by a familiar face, a longtime client who arrives with his senior dog that needs blood work. Carrie welcomes them both, shares details about what to expect and reminds the client that he is a CareCredit cardholder—reassuring him that he can pay over time.

9:00 a.m.

Carrie is able to quickly process the client's payment through the integrated software using his CareCredit credit card. She's able to help him gain peace of mind and get him on his way in no time.

11:00 a.m.

Carrie calls a client whose dog is having surgery the next day. After discussing the associated costs, Carrie accesses the client record—without using an additional login—and sends the client a link to apply for the CareCredit credit card.

9:45 a.m.

Another client arrives with her frenzied feline but realizes she forgot her CareCredit credit card at home. Carrie jumps into action, does a secure account lookup and rapidly runs the transaction, all in the software. Five minutes saved the day (and probably some skin)!



4:00 p.m.

When Carrie returns to the front desk after her quick break, she's greeted by a client who wants a refund because they bought the wrong pet food. Carrie uses the integration to quickly find the client's record and invoice. Within just a few clicks, she issues the refund.

5:00 p.m.

At the end of her shift, Carrie checks the receivables for the day. Because the CareCredit transactions are automatically posted back to the ledger, there's no extra work or added workflows!

Find out more about CareCredit
Call 844-812-8111 or visit carecredit.com/vetenroll

Go to carecredit.com/partnerships to learn more about integrating your practice management software.

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YOUR TURN Today's Veterinary Business provides a forum for readers to comment on anything in this journal and on any topic relevant to the business of veterinary medicine. Please email submissions to **kniedziela@navc.com**. Include your name, professional degrees and credentials, workplace or city of residence, and contact information.

The Biggest Silent Health Crisis in Vet Med

BY LIZ BARTON, MA, VETMB, MRCVS, MCIPR
CAMBRIDGE, ENGLAND

What if I told you our profession was largely ignoring an insidious disease among 50% of the pet population? What if I went on to say the symptoms were preventable, yet due to a lack of awareness and understanding, the condition largely went untreated? If I expanded to say it caused increased morbidity and mortality from middle age onward in otherwise healthy animals — through increasing risk of cardiovascular disease, urogenital disease, musculoskeletal weakening, changes to coat and skin health, brain aging, behavioral shifts and sleep disturbance — would you feel deeply concerned that we weren't doing more? How about the fact that the owners were devastated, as they no longer recognized their beloved pet, which had changed beyond recognition and sadly lost its joie de vivre? And then, I dropped the bombshell that the condition is highly treatable and that the majority of animals aren't being helped, as either their owners aren't seeking advice or when they do, veterinarians don't have all the needed information, so they provide only partial treatment or write off the symptoms as "old age."

In such a world, I have no doubt we'd be highly motivated as a profession to research the heck out of the condition, find the best treatments, launch awareness campaigns and provide comprehensive CE.

And yet, we essentially ignore it in our wonderful veterinary colleagues.

I am talking about menopause and am on a mission to make sure we do better for anyone with ovaries who crosses our path, whether that person is a friend, a colleague, a partner, a family member or even a client.

A Brief Overview

Menopause is the day 12 months after a person with ovaries has had her last menstrual cycle. (I will refer to women/females through this article for consistency with the literature, but I recognize that all genders with these hormonal changes might be impacted.) The average age for menopause is 51.

Perimenopause is the period leading up to and following menopause, where fluctuations in sex hormones (predominantly estrogens but also progesterone and testosterone) can cause physical and psychological symptoms. As sex hormone receptors exist in most organs, the symptoms vary widely both within and between individuals. Nearly three dozen symptoms are recognized, but over 100 have been described. Most women (80% to 96% in the literature) experience some symptoms, which can vary from hot flashes and itchy ears to sleeplessness and anxiety to muscle weakness and joint pain, with no predictable pattern or consistency. Perimenopause lasts, on average, for eight years but can persist for decades.



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Even among women who experience no symptoms — some find this stage of life liberating — there are still significant underlying changes to organ structure and function. If the changes are not addressed through the perimenopause period, the likelihood of serious health conditions increases later in life and includes stroke, urinary tract infections and incontinence, pathological fractures and dementia.

So, I urge all individuals with ovaries to take proactive preventive action through lifestyle adjustments that can boost health and longevity in their older age.

The Workplace Crisis

Here's some stark data for you:

- 1 in 10 women who worked during menopause have left a job due to their symptoms.
- 26% took time off work.
- The Mayo Clinic estimates an annual workday loss of $1.8 billion in the United States.



- Around 1 in 6 people consider leaving work due to a lack of symptom support.

Money talks is a simple fact. I urge readers to consider the enormous potential in improving retention, performance and career progression in women through this stage of life. Doing so can bolster your practice revenue and staff and client satisfaction, leading to significant cumulative gains.

Though I'm talking money, I believe the facts that follow are far more compelling. I urge you to do the right thing for your teams, more for the sake of our humanity than the financial benefits.

The Mental Health Crisis

The peak age for women to die by suicide is 45 to 54 years old (compared to 75 years and over for men, according to Statista). We also know that veterinary professionals are two to four times more likely than any other profession or the general population to die by suicide. Those sad statistics are a huge wake-up call for our industry. While the impact of perimenopause on mental health is well documented (with links to depression, anxiety, mood changes and suicidal ideation), I cannot find any published research exploring potential links between death by suicide and perimenopause. It's a yawning gap in knowledge and remains an association only by correlation.

We must do more for those women and their devastated and bereaved loved ones. A nationwide campaign, GenM, aimed at raising awareness among men in the United Kingdom, began in 2022 following the story of David Salmon, whose wife died by suicide during perimenopause.

We can and should do more.

The Identity Crisis

Thanks to the multiplicity and variety of symptoms, menopausal women can lose our very sense of self. Changes to our integument result in hair loss, brittle nails and wrinkled skin as our keratin and collagen production go into retirement. We don't recognize ourselves in the mirror. While we may want to age gracefully, it's challenging for a gender that is too often judged by appearance (whether intentionally or subconsciously). Add to that the fact that we fatigue more quickly, losing muscle mass and experiencing joint pains, so we feel weaker and unable to exercise, lift or move in the same way. It can be incredibly frustrating.

Meanwhile, our formerly reliable super brain suffers unpredictable blackouts as our frontal lobe, which has the highest concentration of estrogen receptors of any organ, is deprived of the hormone. And it's no respecter of circumstance, choosing to clock out without notice amid sentences, whether during high-power meetings or challenging client conversations. The words just disappear. We don't recognize our forgetful, unpredictable brain and begin to question our reliability, which can be a huge knock to our confidence.

Then there's the emotional dragon that emerges inside — an intolerant, unpredictable, anxious, detached, fire-breathing beast that takes over our person at the most unexpected of times. The anger, fear, frustration and sheer force of emotion it unleashes are qualities we often fail to recognize in ourselves, and they take those around us by surprise.

To sum it up:

- We don't recognize the changes in our body, brain and emotions.
- We can lose confidence in how we look, think and behave.
- We don't want to inhibit our new self, especially when we have just built up the confidence, experience and self-awareness to start accepting even liking the old one.

The Working Life Crisis

All these changes affect how we think, feel and perform at home and in the workplace. At a time when we have accumulated a wealth of life and work experience (and should be peaking in our careers), perimenopause lurks around the corner like a tiger ready to pounce and shake our very foundation.

If workplaces don't make allowances to manage symptoms and provide support, many women reduce their hours, step away from senior roles or leave work altogether. They are less likely to apply for promotions and, thanks to gendered ageism, are less likely to succeed when they do. Relationships with colleagues and at home suffer.



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From Crisis to Opportunity

I initially posed this article's title as a question. However, as I began writing, I convinced myself that "The Biggest Silent Health Crisis in Vet Med" is a statement of fact rather than a ponderable.

I encourage all readers, regardless of gender, to empower themselves with knowledge to support themselves or others during this significant life phase. By extension, we can then understand and help those with other symptoms of hormonal fluctuations throughout all stages of life. There's a lot of intersectionality with premenstrual syndrome, premenstrual dysphoric disorder, endometriosis, and medically or surgically induced hormonal changes.

We have a tremendous opportunity to change the taboo, stigma and culture of acceptance of women's suffering and turn menopause into Me.No.Pause. Women who receive support in their workplaces report significantly less impact of symptoms on their working life. Our majority female industry should be leading the way for other industries and helping so many people live happier, healthier, longer lives in the workplace and beyond.

A Call to Action

I urge you to access free bite-sized veterinary-specific resources through sponsor-supported WellVet at bit.ly/45WRVEs. You will find expert-provided information ranging from the neuropsychology of hormones and how they impact personalities to lifestyle changes, hormone therapies and practical symptom management to preventive self-care and how to have conversations with your team and men. There's even a three-minute animation to give you a quick overview of the most important points to start a conversation.

I encourage readers to go a step further and share the resources with others. Also, request CE on menopause through webinars and at conferences. And join the peer Facebook group Veterinary Menopause Chats at bit.ly/4ltFp3P.

Finally, please email me at liz@wellvet.co.uk if you're a veterinary leader or budget holder and would like to support the continuation of this work.

DR. LIZ BARTON is a director of the U.K.–based not-for-profit organization WellVet. A veterinarian with 17 years of broad clinical experience, she moved into communications with the teleradiology company VET.CT. TVB

TIPS FOR EMPLOYERS

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Workplaces can support women who may be experiencing menopause by offering flexible working arrangements, adjustable room temperatures, nonrestrictive and breathable uniforms, and adequate access to restrooms."

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News Briefs

Brakke Founder Ron Brakke Dies

Brakke Consulting founder and president emeritus Ron Brakke died July 30. The company later announced a joint venture with **Trone Research and Consulting** in which the two firms combined their market research businesses under the Trone name. Brakke Consulting will continue to offer consulting, transactional and recruiting services.

13 Startups Find Support in Topeka

The business accelerator **Plug and Play Topeka** selected 13 animal health startups to participate in an 18-week program that includes pitch opportunities, an introduction to mentors and corporate entities, and business development workshops. Among the companies are **Arterra Pet Science** of Austin, Texas; **Branvine** of Gardena, California; **Hoomanely** of Palo Alto, California; **Testblu Diagnostics** of Berlin, Germany; and New York City-based **Treat**.

CityVet Is Expanding Into Florida

CityVet, a network of 65 veterinarian-owned practices, will enter the Florida market with a clinic in Orlando's Lake Nona master-planned community. Each CityVet location offers comprehensive services, including preventive care, diagnostics, surgery and dental care.

Roo Lists Hundreds of Externships

The veterinarian relief company **Roo** launched Roo Uni, a platform where veterinary students can search and apply for externships. More than 800 animal hospitals across 47 states are represented. Details are at bit.ly/4lL3Xp0.

Inventory Ally Offers Mobile App

Inventory Ally released a mobile version that enables veterinary teams to manage inventory tasks directly from their phones. The new offering also features Pill Counter, a visual tool that allows teams to quickly and accurately count medications by snapping a photo. Additional enhancements, including barcode scanning, offline mode and expanded cycle count functionality, are in development.

Register Now for Hill's Symposium

Hill's Pet Nutrition will hold the virtual Hill's Global Symposium on Oct. 27 and 28. Participants may earn up to nine hours of RACE-approved CE credits. Register for free at bit.ly/4n687sZ.

Innovetive Petcare Buys Practice

Terravet Real Estate Solutions completed the $3.33 million acquisition of Dogwood Veterinary Specialty and Emergency in Marietta, Georgia. The transaction also included the purchase of the practice by **Innovetive Petcare**, a network of veterinary hospitals. Dogwood is a 24/7 emergency hospital employing more than 70 people, including 17 full-time doctors.

Coming Soon: Adoro Pet Insurance

The U.S. pet insurance industry will have a new provider starting in the fourth quarter of 2025: **Adoro Pet Insurance Services**. CEO Gavin Friedman and president and chief operating officer Tricia Plouf co-founded the Seattle-based company. According to Adoro, underwriting capacity will be provided by Crum & Forster, whose other pet insurance brands include ASPCA, Hartville and Pumpkin.

Otto Introduces AI Recap Pro

Austin, Texas-based **Otto** launched Otto AI Recap Pro, a standalone version of its Otto AI Recap scribe tool. The new offering integrates directly into Otto Flow, the company's all-in-one communication platform for online booking, forms, messages, reminders, payments and internal collaboration.

Learn About DEI in Vet Med

Thanks to a grant from Maddie's Fund, the **Multicultural Veterinary Medical Association** made public the two-part series "Veterinary Clinics: Small Animal Practice — Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in Veterinary Medicine." The collections, published by Elsevier and edited by Dr. Christina V. Tran, feature 20 review articles and editorials from leading voices in DEI. Learn more at mcvma.org/publications.

Introducing Mission Pet Health

Two hospital networks — Southern Veterinary Partners and Mission Veterinary Partners — are now known as **Mission Pet Health** following their 2024 merger.

Packaged Facts Polls Pet Owners

A **Packaged Facts** survey discovered that "Among those who have used veterinary services in the last 12 months, 70% of dog owners and 68% of cat owners have gone to a local/independent clinic or hospital, making these traditional-style providers by far the most widely used veterinary practice format." The complete survey is available for purchase at bit.ly/4mqYFjg.

UC Davis Sets Fundraising Record

The **UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine** raised a record $118 million in fiscal year 2024-25. Nearly 5,400 individuals, corporations and foundations made 8,632 philanthropic contributions.

Stem Cell Firm Gets $18 Million

Gallant, a developer of stem cell therapies for cats and dogs, successfully closed an $18 million Series B financing round. Gallant's first product for refractory feline chronic gingivostomatitis could receive conditional approval in early 2026, becoming "the first FDA-labeled, allogeneic stem cell therapy in veterinary medicine," according to the company.

Investors Like Small Door's Plans

Small Door Veterinary, a New York–based hospital network, raised $55 million from investors to support its continued growth. Small Door's two newest membership-based clinics are in New York City and McLean, Virginia.

AAHA Unveils More Standards

The **American Animal Hospital Association** released four new points-based Standards of Accreditation involving the discouragement of nontherapeutic ear crops, devocalizations and feline declaws and one focusing on the importance of discussing microchipping with pet owners.

FDA Approves Siemens MR Scanner

Siemens Healthineers received U.S. Food and Drug Administration clearance for the Magnetom Flow.Ace, a 1.5 Tesla platform for magnetic resonance imaging and featuring only 0.7 liters of liquid helium and no quench pipe. According to the company, the system is "the first Siemens Healthineers MR scanner to be marketed to the veterinary radiology community as well as for general radiology."

PRN Introduces ReGum Vet

PRN Pharmacal announced the U.S. launch of ReGum Vet, a scaffold for placement into a dog's periodontal defect as part of a framework for tissue repair. The product contains enzymatically cross-linked and biodegradable gelatin.

Utah State Students Stay in Utah

The **Utah State University College of Veterinary Medicine** launched its four-year DVM program by holding a white coat ceremony for 42 first-year students. Since 2012, the Logan, Utah, institution sent veterinary students to Washington State University for the final two years of studies in a partnership known as 2+2. The Class of 2029 will be the first to complete all veterinary education in Utah.

Merck Offers Annual Preventive

Merck Animal Health earned U.S. regulatory approval of Bravecto Quantum, an injectable drug administered once a year to treat and protect dogs from fleas and ticks. The product (fluralaner for extended-release injectable suspension) is approved for use in more than 50 countries worldwide.

Veterinary Educators Bond Online

The **Association of Veterinary Technician Educators** will launch a new online platform in late 2025 for educators to connect, exchange resources, navigate shared challenges and engage in professional discussions. **Chewy Health** is a strategic partner and investor.

Bailey Becomes AVMA President

Dr. Michael Q. Bailey, an educator, clinician and board-certified veterinary radiologist, assumed the position of president of the **American Veterinary Medical Association**. He is the first African-American to serve in the role. Dr. Jennifer K. Quammen was named president-elect for the 2026–2027 term.

New From Elanco: TruCan Ultra CIV

The U.S. Department of Agriculture approved **Elanco Animal Health**'s TruCan Ultra CIV H3N2/H3N8, a canine influenza vaccine. "This vaccine not only offers broad protection against canine influenza but also integrates seamlessly into our Tru Portfolio," said Elanco executive vice president Bobby Modi.

Hill's Selects Hsu as President

Hill's Pet Nutrition promoted Yvonne Hsu to president, replacing John Hazlin, who is now the chief growth officer for parent company Colgate-Palmolive. Hsu most recently was president and general manager of Hill's Pet Nutrition U.S.

Cubex Unveils Inventory Tool

Cubex released Buddy, a wireless, cloud-connected inventory management device. "Buddy is plug-and-play and installs in seconds," the company stated. "Once paired with the cloud-connected Smart Hub, it automatically tracks usage, updates stock levels and alerts staff when it's time to restock — no scanning, no spreadsheets and no guesswork."

CoVet Teams With Colorado State

CoVet, an AI-powered clinical documentation assistant, announced a strategic collaboration with Colorado State University's College of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences. "Over the next year, CoVet will provide comprehensive onboarding and support to ensure seamless integration with CSU Veterinary Health System's hospital electronic medical record systems," according to the company.

ScribbleVet Partners With Hound

ScribbleVet, which makes an AI-powered veterinary scribe, launched a strategic partnership with **Hound**, the developer of veterinary staff recruitment and retention software.

Americans Say 'Yes!' to Cats

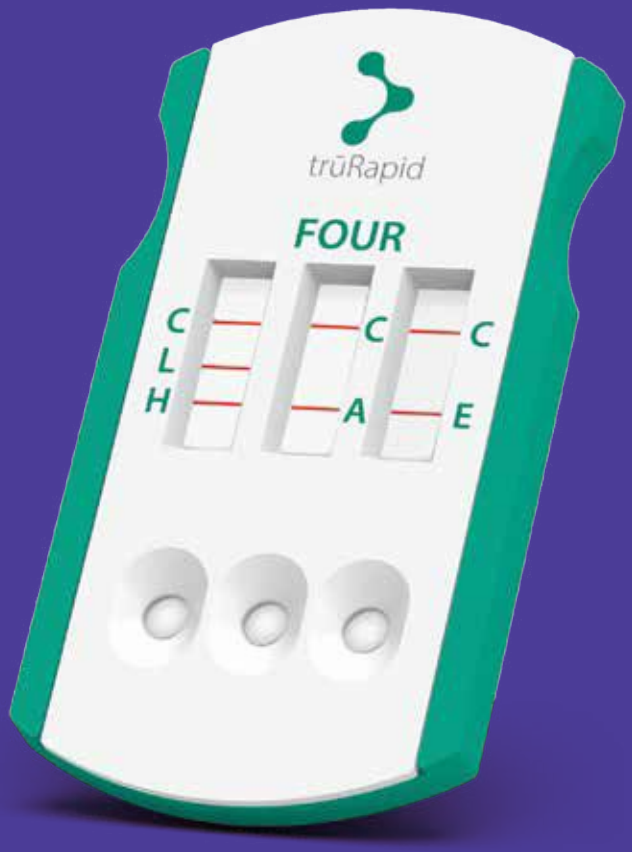
The number of U.S. cat-owning households jumped by 23%, from 40 million in 2023 to 49 million in 2024, according to the **American Pet Products Association**. The *2025 Dog and Cat Report* also showed that since 2018, households with two cats rose by 8% and those with three or more cats spiked by 36%. In addition, 41% of dog owners purchased premium food, a 5% increase from 2023.

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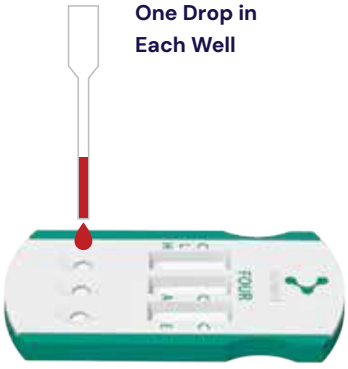
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1: Drop Sample

One Drop in Each Well



2: Drop Sample Buffer

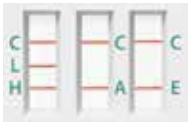
10 mins

Two Drops in Each Well



3: Read Result

Positive



Negative



SIMPLY RAPID

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Q&A

YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED
WITH ERNIE WARD, DVM, CVFT

Q: I've been a veterinarian for over 30 years. These days, clients call themselves "fur parents" and get emotional over things like ear infections and vaccines. I want to be compassionate, but I didn't sign up to be a therapist. What changed?

A: Here's the short answer: Everything changed. But not all at once.

I'm a Gen Xer, and I remember when it wasn't common to grieve a pet publicly or refer to them as a "fur baby." As a veterinary student, I heard I was too emotional about animals. I was reprimanded for sitting on the exam room floor, cradling a Doberman suffering from heart failure. I was taught that animals were property, not family. However, I didn't buy it, and I wasn't alone. Gen X was the first generation to truly push the boundary by treating pets as full-fledged family members.

Millennials and Gen Zers didn't just continue that shift; they turned it into a cultural standard. For many of today's clients, pets are emotional anchors, family members and a central part of their lifestyle. In a 2025 survey, 71% of child-free couples said their lives revolved around their dogs, and more than half admitted to canceling plans so they could stay home with their pets. That's why clients expect more than clinical care from us. They want



relatability, compassion and empathy. And if you come across as cold or dismissive, they might not come back.

Let's be clear: Empathy isn't just a nice-to-have in veterinary care. It's also a clinical necessity.

Studies of veterinary appointments reveal that explicit empathy statements are used in only about 7% of consultations. That means 93% of visits lack the simple "I understand" moment that clients need, even though empathy is proven to boost trust, satisfaction and compliance. We can do better.

So, what does that look like in practice? Try this:

- **Start with acknowledgment:** "I can tell how important Bella is to you."
- **Follow with reassurance:** "Let's walk through what's going on and how we can help."
- **Keep the focus on veterinary care:** Stay clinical but remain human.

You don't have to be a therapist. But you do have to meet clients where they are emotionally and clinically. That doesn't take a counseling degree. It takes a pause, a few kind words and the willingness to treat the relationship with as much care as the medicine.

Q: I'm hiring people, but I can't keep anyone longer than six months. My older team members say younger employees are lazy and lack a work ethic. What's going on here?

A: Your complaint is so common that it's practically wallpaper in veterinary management forums. Frustrated practice owners and managers say they can't get new hires to step up, while newer hires quietly wonder why they're expected to work 50-hour weeks for fast-food wages and zero training. Both sides feel unheard. That's the problem.

The issue isn't that people don't want to work. It's that they want to work differently. When employees leave after three months, someone can easily assume they were "plain lazy" or "didn't have what it takes." But more often, they didn't get what they needed: job clarity, mentorship, meaningful work and a sense that their role could lead somewhere better.

Let's be honest. Working in a veterinary clinic is challenging. The pay is too low in many places, and the culture can be unforgiving. You show up, get thrown into chaos, and if you sink, well, "Maybe you weren't cut out for it." That used to be the norm. Now, people stop showing up.

A 2024 American Animal Hospital Association study found that nearly 30% of veterinary professionals planned to leave their current role within a year,

15% expected to leave clinical practice entirely, and 9 out of 10 reported no intention to return once they ditched veterinary medicine. Ouch.

The most common reasons? Low pay, a lack of appreciation, poor communication and a toxic work environment. And it isn't just a veterinary problem. Gen Zers and younger millennials are reshaping workplaces in every industry. Flexibility, purpose and fair treatment aren't perks anymore. They're the starting point.

This is where leadership comes in. If you think no one wants to work, ask your team members what they need to stay. Start with real onboarding, not just a clinic tour and a clip-on name tag. Offer structured performance reviews and a clear path for pay raises or career advancement. Small gestures such as handwritten thank-you notes, mental health support and shared decision-making can make a big difference.

Shared decision-making doesn't mean giving up control. It means involving your team in everyday decisions, such as schedule adjustments or workflow changes. Younger employees, especially Gen Zers and millennials, expect that kind of collaboration. Surveys show they're more engaged when their input is heard and acted on. When people think their voice matters, they're more likely to stay and to care.

The work ethic isn't dead, but unquestioning loyalty is. If you want great people to stay, you must give them a reason to believe in the job and your leadership.

Q: I accepted a client's follow request on my personal Instagram. Now she's messaging me about her dog's meds on a Saturday. Should I ignore her, or am I being rude?

A: This one takes me back. In the early days of Facebook, I let a few select clients "friend me." At first, my response seemed like friendly outreach to loyal customers. But soon and usually after hours, I was answering questions about lab results and medication refills through Messenger. That's when it hit me: I was basically performing telemedicine for free and on my own time. It had to stop. I told clients I couldn't offer medical advice through social media and that my personal page wasn't intended for clinic communication. Most of them understood, but only because I set a boundary and stuck to it.



What should you do when a client messages you on Instagram with a pet health concern or refill request? Be polite, firm and redirect immediately: "Hi! I'm not able to handle medical or medication requests here. Please call the clinic so we can help you the right way."

If they message again, don't waffle: "I want to make sure your pet gets proper care, and I can't do that through direct messages. Please contact the clinic directly."

Every time you respond to a medical question on your personal social media, you train clients to expect that kind of access. That's not fair to you, your license or your time.

The fix? Start by keeping your personal and professional accounts separate. For example:

- **Personal page:** Set it to private and say in your bio: "Not monitored for pet care questions. Please contact the clinic."
- **Professional page:** Use it to share tips, updates and education. Be clear in your bio that direct messages are not for medical communication and will not be answered.

In addition, use a pinned post or Instagram Highlights reel that says: "For your pet's privacy and safety, please contact the clinic with all medical questions. Messages here are not monitored for patient care and will not be answered."

State veterinary boards are clear: Medical advice without a valid VCPR and proper documentation can create legal headaches and put your license at risk. And besides, you deserve a personal life that doesn't revolve around your inbox. TVB



DR. ERNIE WARD
The Opening Shots columnist (drernieward.com) is an award-winning veterinarian, impact entrepreneur, book author and media personality. When he's not with family or pet patients, Dr. Ward can be found contemplating solutions during endurance athletics and meditation and on his weekly podcast, *Veterinary Viewfinder*. If you have a question about practice life, personal well-being, leadership or veterinary careers, email openingshotstvb@gmail.com.

INSIDE:

24
INNOVATION STATION
What Agentic AI Can Do for You

28
POLITICS & POLICY
A Year to Remember (and Forget)

"Critics of telemedicine continue to claim, or at least imply, that the FDA bans veterinary telemedicine. It ain't so."

30
MONEY MATTERS
Plan Your Taxes Now to Avoid April Surprise

36
PROTECT & DEFEND
9 Questions to Ask Your Insurance Agent



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LEGAL LINGO

You, Your Legacy and Your Practice's Future

Every veterinary business owner needs estate, succession and asset-protection plans.

BY PETER H. TANELLA, ESQ., AND JASON E. MARX, ESQ.

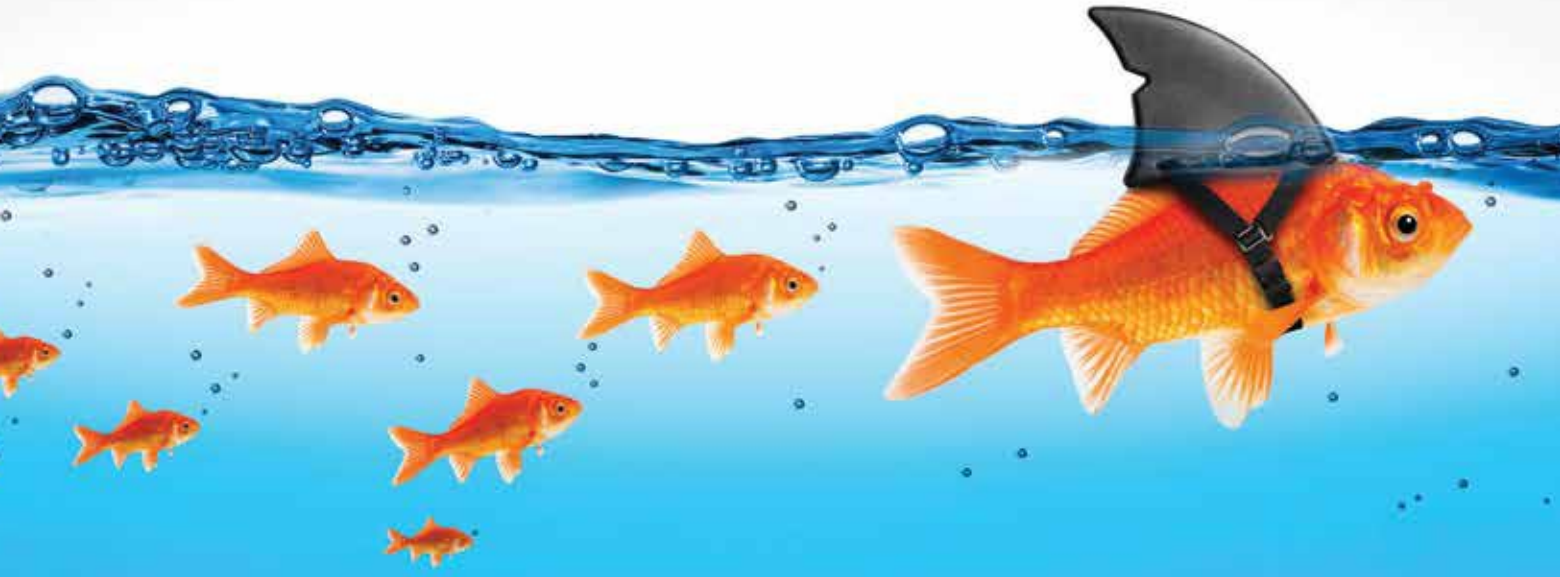
If you are a veterinarian who owns or co-owns a practice, then estate and business succession planning is an essential strategy to protect your assets, ensure your patients' continuity of care, and provide for your family and staff. At its core, estate planning is about ensuring that your wishes are honored if you become incapacitated or pass away, while also minimizing the administrative burden and tax consequences for your loved ones. Business succession planning means preparing for the eventual transition of your practice's ownership and management.

What's in Your Estate?

For veterinarians, estate planning often goes beyond the basics of wills and powers of attorney. It might include trusts to manage or transfer specific business interests, plans for the care of personal pets, and strategies to avoid probate, which can (depending on the state of residence) be a lengthy, expensive and public process.

A practice owner's well-crafted estate plan typically includes a will, which directs the distribution of assets upon death. Many veterinarians also establish revocable living trusts, which can hold assets during a lifetime, allowing for a

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smoother transition upon incapacity or death and avoiding probate. Durable powers of attorney and advanced health care directives are critical for ensuring that someone trusted can make financial, legal and medical decisions if you are unable to do so. If you have minor children or dependents, guardianship provisions are essential.

What sets veterinarians apart from many other business professionals is the need to address the practice's future. A thriving hospital's value can quickly erode if the owner is suddenly unable to work and lacks a clear plan. Clients may leave, staff might seek other employment, and the goodwill built over the years can dissipate.

Ensuring Continuity and Value

Business succession planning is not just about retirement; it also covers the unexpected, such as death, disability and a sudden decision to leave the veterinary profession. A robust succession plan ensures your practice continues to serve clients, support staff and maintain the business's value, regardless of what the future holds.

The first step in succession planning is to define the triggering events that will prompt a transition. They may include a planned retirement, an abrupt incapacity or even a strategic decision to sell the practice. Once you identify those events, your next step is to establish procedures for selecting and training your successors. At practices with multiple owners, this phase might involve buy-sell agreements that dictate how ownership interests are valued and transferred. For sole practitioners, it may mean identifying an associate veterinarian or external buyer who can step in.

Valuing a practice is a nuanced process that typically combines elements of the asset, income and market-based approaches. Leading valuation firms often rely primarily on the income approach, applying a capitalization rate to normalized earnings to estimate a fair market value. This method reflects the earning potential of the practice and is widely accepted by banks, buyers and industry professionals.

The chosen valuation method has meaningful implications, especially tax-related, for the buyer and the seller. Because of those complexities, both sides should work with experienced veterinary valuation professionals to ensure a fair, well-documented and defensible assessment.

Buy-sell agreements are a critical component of succession planning. These legally binding contracts set out the terms under which ownership interests can be bought or sold, including pricing formulas, payment terms and restrictions on transfers. They provide certainty and help prevent disputes among owners, heirs and potential buyers.

Shielding What Matters Most

Practice owners face significant liability risks, from malpractice claims to employee disputes and contractual issues. Asset protection is about structuring your personal and business affairs to minimize the chance that a lawsuit or creditor claim could jeopardize your hard-earned possessions.

One of the most effective tools for asset protection is the use of trusts. Revocable trusts offer flexibility and control but do not provide creditor protection, while irrevocable trusts can shield assets from certain claims but require relinquishing control. For many veterinarians, a combination of trusts balances these competing interests.

Insurance remains a cornerstone of asset protection. Malpractice insurance is a must, but you should supplement it with general liability, property and umbrella policies to provide layers of protection against a wide range of risks.

Additionally, veterinarians often structure their practices as professional limited liability companies (PLLCs) or professional corporations to separate personal assets from business liabilities. In some cases, real estate and expensive equipment are held in separate entities and leased to the practice, further insulating them from operational risks.

You should strike a balance when protecting your assets. Complex structures can be expensive to maintain and might attract unwanted scrutiny, while simplistic approaches can leave significant gaps. The key is to work with experienced advisers who understand the risks facing veterinarians and can tailor solutions accordingly.

Selling the Practice

When the time comes to transition out of practice ownership, veterinarians generally face two options: selling to a third party or to associate employees. Each approach has distinct advantages,

PAYING THE GOVERNMENT

Tax implications are a significant consideration for practice owners, whether they sell to a corporate entity or an associate veterinarian. The sale structure, which could involve assets or stock, will determine the tax treatment for the seller and the buyer. Asset sales may result in higher taxes for the seller but offer the buyer a step-up in basis, while stock sales can be more tax-efficient for the seller but less attractive to the buyer. Phased buy-ins, often used in associate sales, can spread tax consequences over several years and provide greater flexibility.

challenges and implications for the seller, practice and broader community.

Selling to a third party often involves external buyers, such as private equity firms, corporate consolidators or independent veterinarians. These transactions can yield a higher sale price and may offer the owner a faster exit, particularly when well-capitalized consolidators are involved.

Third-party deals also come with risks. With a corporate buyer, a significant culture shift can occur as the new owner implements new management styles or policies. Staff and clients may feel uncertain about the future, leading to attrition.

Selling to an independent veterinarian often allows for more continuity in the practice's day-to-day operations but may deliver a lower purchase price or more flexible financing terms.

Regardless of the buyer, negotiations can be complex, especially when the purchaser is a sophisticated entity familiar with mergers and acquisitions. Regulatory issues, such as state corporate practice of medicine (CPOM) laws, must be navigated, particularly if the buyer is not a licensed veterinarian.

On the other hand, selling to associate employees offers a more gradual and often smoother transition. Associates are familiar with the practice's culture, clients and operations. This approach can preserve your practice's legacy and provide continuity for staff and clients. However, it is not without challenges. Associates may lack the financial resources to purchase the practice outright and might require creative financing solutions or phased buy-ins. The risk of a failed transition also exists, potentially straining relationships and jeopardizing the practice's stability.

From a legal and regulatory standpoint, sales to associates are often more straightforward, as the buyers are typically licensed veterinarians. Even so, the transaction should be carefully structured to balance the interests of both parties and ensure that key provisions, such as noncompete, nonsolicitation and confidentiality clauses, are addressed.



PETER H. TANELLA
The Legal Lingo columnist chairs Mandelbaum Barrett's National Veterinary Law Group. He has advised hundreds of veterinarians on practice acquisitions,sales, mergers, partnerships, joint ventures and associate buy-ins, the structuring of management service organizations, and the development of practice succession strategies. Email him at ptanella@mblawfirm.com.



JASON E. MARX
The Legal Lingo guest columnist is a partner at Mandelbaum Barrett PC and an adviser in the firm's tax, trusts and estates practice groups.

Hurdles and Issues

Veterinarians and their advisers must navigate a range of challenges in estate and business succession plans. The corporate structure, whether an PLLC, corporation or partnership, has significant implications for succession planning, tax efficiency and asset protection. Outdated or poorly drafted organizational documents and shareholder or operating agreements can hinder a smooth transition. Review and update them regularly.

Tax planning is an integral part of the process. Minimizing estate and income taxes through trusts, gifting strategies and carefully structured sales can preserve more of the practice's value for the owner and heirs. Liquidity is another concern, as estate taxes might be due shortly after death, potentially forcing a distressed sale if sufficient funds are not available.

Asset protection must be integrated into estate and succession planning. It includes not only shielding assets from professional liability and creditors but also ensuring the chosen business structure does not inadvertently trigger adverse tax consequences or regulatory scrutiny.

Regulatory and legal hurdles are particularly significant in the veterinary industry. CPOM laws, which vary by state, can restrict who may own and operate a veterinary practice. They are especially relevant in sales to private equity or nonveterinarian buyers, who may need to use management services organizations or other creative structures to comply with the law. Ensuring that all agreements are properly drafted and enforceable is essential in protecting the practice's value.

Best Practices and Recommendations

Constructing the most successful estate and business succession plans start early, ideally several years before an anticipated transition. This step allows time to identify and train successors, optimize tax and legal structures, and communicate with all stakeholders.

A team approach is essential. Veterinarians should work closely with legal, tax, financial and practice management advisers who understand the veterinary industry. Education and communication are also key. Inform your associates and staff and, when appropriate, involve them in the planning to ensure a smooth transition and to maintain morale.

All options should be considered, from an outright sale or a merger to internal succession or employee ownership. The chosen approach should be tailored to your personal and business goals. TVB

TOPIC: FINANCE

An Interview with Derek Lapis, Founder & CEO of PayLow Pro



Helping veterinary practices keep more of every dollar by rethinking payments

For many clinics, credit-card fees are an invisible tax. They nibble at margins month after month—often to the tune of five or six figures a year—while teams juggle clunky terminals, manual reconciliations, and unhappy owners. Derek Lapis, a 18-year payments veteran and founder of PayLow Pro, believes there's a better way: make payment choice transparent, integrate it into the PMS, and give practices control of their revenue again.
Below, Derek shares how Dual Pricing (also called Payment Preference Pricing) works in real life—and how veterinary hospitals from Florida to Michigan are using it to save thousands without sacrificing client experience.

Q: Derek, what inspired you to start PayLow Pro?

Derek: I've worked in payments for over 18 years, and I kept seeing how much money veterinary practices were losing to card fees—often tens of thousands per year. It never sat right with me that clinics doing such important work had to surrender so much of their revenue to the processor. I started PayLow Pro to return control to practices with a solution that's seamless, compliant, and client-friendly.

Q: What's the biggest processing challenge you see in clinics today?

Derek: The fees are crushing—and they're easy to miss because they're scattered across statements. Add in long contracts, leased or outdated equipment, and tedious refund/reporting workflows, and you have an outdated system that hasn't kept up with modern veterinary medicine.

Q: How does PayLow Pro promote savings?

Derek: We use Dual Pricing / Payment Preference Pricing. At checkout, clients see two prices: a card price (which covers the processing cost) and a cash/ACH price. If a client wants the convenience of paying by card, they choose that option; if they want to save, they choose cash or ACH. The practice collects 100% of its price either way.

Q: Will this create friction at the front desk?

Derek: That's the #1 fear, and it almost never materializes. We train teams to present the card price first so it doesn't feel like an add-on. We also equip practices with clear signage and give them the ability to waive the card price for edge cases. In our experience, fewer than 5% of clients question it—and practices routinely tell us they wish they'd switched sooner.

Q: How does it fit into the PMS and day-to-day workflow?

Derek: Integration is the key. Our overlay works with leading veterinary platforms—clinics are using it today with solutions like IDEXX Neo, AviMark, Cornerstone, ezyVet, Shepherd, etc...
With one click, the Card/ACH/Cash pricing options are displayed. Refunds, tokenization, and reporting all sync back—no double entry, no reconciliation headaches.

"Choice and transparency are the whole point. Most clients pick a card without a second thought—and your clinic stops absorbing the fee." —Derek Lapis

Q: What about contracts and upfront costs?

Derek: We don't do "gotchas." No contracts. No setup fees. We ship the equipment at no cost, handle on-site or remote installation and training, and you can keep your current processor live while you try us. If it's not a fit, send the terminals back—no penalty, no hassle.

Q: What savings are practices actually seeing?

Derek: Many clinics eliminate 100% of their card processing costs. That can mean $10,000–$20,000+ per year—and for higher-volume practices, significantly more. One urgent-care clinic we onboarded was losing about $12,500 per month; within weeks of going live, that money stayed in the practice. Savings like that fund new equipment, staff raises, or expanded services without raising fees across the board.

Q: Beyond savings, how do you support practices long-term?

Derek: We don't just ship a box. Our team installs, trains, coaches communication, and we're available for ongoing support—including sending reps on-site when needed. We see ourselves as partners, not just processors.

Q: What's next for PayLow Pro and veterinary payments?

Derek: Clinics want integrated, automated workflows—payments shouldn't be separate. We're investing in software to stay the go-to provider for top veterinary platforms. That means delivering seamless treatment-plan presenting, transparent invoicing, smart reconciliation, and AI-powered tools—at no cost to the clinic.

Q: What would you say to a clinic that's on the fence about Dual Pricing?

Run PayLow Pro next to your current processor and watch the outcome. Clients get a clear choice; you keep 100% of your price. Objections are rare, and you can waive the card price anytime. We handle install, PMS integration, training, and signage—no contract or upfront cost. Most clinics immediately free up five figures a year and never look back. If it's not a fit, you revert in minutes.

Dual Pricing in the Real World:

Pets Furst Urgent Care ~ IDEXX Neo practice

- Problem: $12,500/month in fees; surcharging /cash discounting were half-measures.
- Fix: Dual Pricing integrated with Neo; one-click totals, secure and tokenized cards-on-file, one-click refunds; optional fee-waive and keep old processor live during rollout.
- Result: Fees were eliminated overnight; minimal client objections ("non-issue" at checkout); faster repeat checkouts and refunds.

Fremont Animal Hospital ~ 40 patients/day, 7 staff

- Problem: Fees crept 2.9% → 3.5%; Clover/FD150 issues; slow reconciliation.
- Fix: PayLow Pro Dual Pricing + wireless Dejavoo + mobile app backup.
- Result: ~$2,500/month saved (~$30K/yr pace), faster closeouts and savings redirected to paying down the practice loan.

Thinking about it? Here's a simple next step:

▶ **Book a 15-minute demo** to see Dual Pricing inside your workflow. Test PayLow Pro alongside your current processor—no disruption, no contract, no cost.

▶ **Typical outcomes:** 100% fee elimination, faster reconciliation, happier teams—and clients who appreciate transparent choice.

▶ **Scan to read full case studies and book a demo.**

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INNOVATION STATION

What Agentic AI Can Do for You

Next-generation intelligence will help lighten workloads and elevate patient care.

BY NIKHIL TALGERI, MS



If you've ever wished you had an extra set of hands (or maybe an extra pair of eyes and a clipboard) in your veterinary practice, you're not alone. Busy days are the norm. Emergency cases come in unexpectedly. A missed refill request here, a late follow-up there, and before you know it, your well-oiled machine starts to feel a bit overextended.

Now imagine having a digital team member — one that doesn't just follow commands but actually thinks, anticipates and takes initiative. That's the power of agentic AI, and it's starting to reshape the way we approach care, communication and operations inside veterinary practices.

Unlike older systems that passively wait for instructions, agentic AI works proactively. It reads context, understands intent and makes decisions to help lighten your team's load. More than just smart automation, this technology adds intelligence and independence, delivering the kind of support that makes an actual difference in how veterinary teams work.

What Is Agentic AI, and Why Should You Care?

At its core, agentic AI refers to autonomous, goal-directed systems that initiate tasks, learn from experience and adapt to complex environments. These systems don't wait for someone to click a button. They act when they recognize something important.

Let's say a patient's glucose readings have been fluctuating. Instead of requiring a team member to notice, agentic AI could automatically flag the anomaly, cross-reference previous lab work and suggest a closer monitoring schedule — all without a team member needing to prompt it.

And in a veterinary practice, this level of responsiveness can be a game changer.

Due to staff shortages, increased caseloads and higher expectations from pet owners, the demands on your practice have never been greater. Agentic AI acts as a quiet but capable partner, ready to support your team behind the scenes and in real time.

Putting Agentic AI to Work

Here are five ways agentic AI can help your veterinary practice.

1 Clinical Intelligence at Your Fingertips

Imagine having a digital assistant that

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pulls a pet's medical history, summarizes key diagnostics and suggests treatment paths before you walk into the exam room. That's the promise of agentic AI. It will enhance your clinical expertise, surfacing insights that might otherwise get buried under a mountain of paperwork and open browser tabs.

So, instead of sending reminders every three days, agentic AI can analyze which clients are most likely to miss their appointment, and then it personalizes the reminder timing or method.

2 Smarter Scheduling

We all know how chaotic scheduling can get. Late arrivals, emergencies and double bookings create a puzzle. Agentic AI can monitor patient flow, triage urgency and intelligently adjust appointments in real time. It can even send notifications to clients, recommend backup staff schedules or optimize appointment durations based on the case types.

3 Meaningful Pet Owner Engagement

Agentic systems can reach out to clients with tailored reminders, send automated follow-ups post-surgery and respond to basic health questions via chat, keeping pet owners informed and involved without burdening your front desk.

4 Inventory That Thinks For You

Instead of you manually tracking supplies or dealing with last-minute orders, agentic AI can analyze real-time inventory, predict restocking needs and place procurement requests based on actual usage patterns and vendor timelines.

5 Workflow Integrity and Error Prevention

An agentic system can spot prescription inconsistencies, incomplete discharges and missed protocol steps, alerting your team before risks surface. Think of it as a safety net to help your team deliver consistently high standards of care.



How It Changes Life Inside the Practice

Agentic systems can deliver:

- **Better time management:** AI can handle repetitive or time-consuming tasks, freeing your team to focus on what truly matters: delivering compassionate care and engaging in meaningful conversations with pet owners.
- **Improved patient outcomes:** By supporting early intervention, highlighting anomalies and ensuring continuity of care, agentic AI contributes directly to better health outcomes. It's like having an ever-vigilant partner who never gets tired.
- **Happier, healthier teams:** The burnout risk drops because of less mental fatigue and fewer manual tasks to juggle. When staff members are supported by smart systems, the workday feels more manageable and rewarding.
- **An enhanced client experience:** Timely communication, clear follow-ups and intelligent suggestions help build trust and satisfaction. Your clients feel looked after because they are.

What Makes Agentic AI Different?

You might be thinking, "We already use AI or automation in our practice. What's new here?" Great question. While automation helps with routine tasks, like sending appointment reminders, agentic AI introduces autonomy and decision-making.

So, instead of sending reminders every three days, agentic AI can analyze which clients are most likely to miss their appointment, and then it personalizes the reminder timing or method. Instead of you asking it to run a report, agentic AI might proactively notify you of a trend in patient outcomes.

Is It Safe and Ethical?

The short answer to that question is it depends on who's building the agentic system. When choosing to adopt any AI system, you should ask:

- Is the data used responsibly and transparently?
- Do guardrails exist to ensure AI doesn't overstep?
- Can a veterinarian always override the system's suggestions?
- Does the vendor continuously update the technology to remove bias and improve accuracy?

The good news is that most leading developers of veterinary-specific AI platforms are building with ethics and clinical safety top of mind. Still, your due diligence as a practice owner or medical leader is key.

How to Introduce Agentic AI Into Your Practice

You don't need to go from zero to Jetsons overnight. The best way to start is by identifying pain points in your practice. Where is your team consistently overwhelmed? Where do small things fall through the cracks?

Start small — maybe with client communication or inventory management — and expand as your team becomes comfortable. Most platforms that offer agentic AI also include human onboarding and support to help ease the transition.

A Real-World Scenario

Let's say a 9-year-old Labrador named Max presents with chronic arthritis. You enter the SOAP notes and send him home with a prescription.

Behind the scenes, an agentic AI system:

- Flags Max for a check-in in 10 days based on recent case histories.
- Prepares a summary for the DVM that highlights nutritional supplements that might help, based on comparable patients.
- Reminds the pet owner about dosage schedules via a text message.
- Checks inventory levels and schedules a refill delivery.



NIKHIL TALGERI
The Innovation Station guest columnist leads the digital client communications product line for Covetrus. He is an expert on pet health technologies, specializing in AI-based digital outreach, patient engagement and visit management.

BACKGROUND

Agentic AI systems are designed not just to react to commands but also to initiate actions based on high-level goals, marking a shift from tool-like AI to AI agents with long-term autonomy. One of the earliest frameworks proposing this kind of proactive, goal-oriented behavior was Russell and Norvig's "agent function" model in their seminal book *Artificial Intelligence: A Modern Approach*, which laid the foundation for the modern notion of rational, goal-seeking agents in AI.

All this happens without adding any extra work for your team. Early adopters of agentic AI might see additional benefits, such as:

- A 15% to 25% reduction in missed follow-ups.
- Up to a 30% improvement in inventory accuracy.
- Higher client satisfaction scores.
- Less staff turnover due to reduced burnout.

While each veterinary practice's experience might vary, the takeaway is clear: Smart systems, when thoughtfully implemented, can and do make a measurable difference.

The Bottom Line

Agentic AI isn't just another tool. It's also a shift in how we think about support, intelligence and collaboration inside veterinary practices. It's not about replacing your team; it's about giving your employees room to breathe, think and do what they do best: care for pets and guide clients.

Veterinary medicine has always been about heart and science. Agentic AI lets you bring both together in a new, powerful way.

Are You Ready to Take the First Step?

If your practice is exploring ways to improve workflows, reduce staff fatigue or elevate the pet owner experience, now is the time to look at platforms that are building with agentic AI at their core.

Ask your current or prospective technology partners:

- Does the platform use intelligent agents that can take initiative?
- Can the system actively help manage tasks without constant input?
- How does the platform learn and evolve with my practice needs?

The future of care isn't about doing more with less. It's about doing more with the right partner. In many cases, that partner might be an AI agent working quietly (but brilliantly) in the background.

In a world where pets depend on us, we should never have to choose between quality and capacity. And with agentic AI, we might no longer have to. TVB

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POLITICS & POLICY

A Year to Remember (and Forget)

The veterinary industry and regulators still have a lot of work to do to better serve the pet-owning public.

BY MARK CUSHING, JD

The end of 2025 is in sight, so let's review, topic by topic, what happened this year and what we can look forward to in 2026 and beyond. I will start with telemedicine and the 120 million Americans living in states — from New Jersey to California — where a pet owner can use virtual tools to establish a veterinarian-client-patient relationship. That's over 33% of the country.

In July, Ohio was the latest state to approve a telemedicine VCPR, with the Ohio Veterinary Medical Association officially neutral.

Georgia went in the other direction and passed a law that bars state residents from using the ASPCA Poison Control Hotline (what an invaluable resource) and allows telemedicine only if a pet owner calls every veterinary practice within 50 miles and cannot land an appointment. It's hard to envision the law staying on the books for long.

Meanwhile, Texas holds legislative sessions every odd-numbered year, and they last just over five months. Republicans have total control of the House and Senate. The House passed a telemedicine VCPR bill, 129-13, but the Senate was blocked from voting on it. We'll see if a few senators will be able to delay another vote in 2027.

Texas is also where the federal 5th Circuit Court of Appeals handed the Texas Veterinary Medical Examining Board a major defeat in September 2024 with the Hines decision. The conservative 5th Circuit panel ruled that the Texas board should not discipline a veterinarian who uses a telemedicine VCPR to treat an animal, absent evidence of the patient having been harmed. The court dismantled the board's argument point by point, even throwing in some humor that "Uncle Bernard" can use telemedicine in Texas while a "Saint Bernard" can't. Trust me, veterinary telemedicine is not dead in Texas.



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Finally, critics of telemedicine continue to claim, or at least imply, that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration bans veterinary telemedicine. It ain't so. When the Animal Medicinal Drug Use Clarification Act was passed 30 years ago, the FDA adopted a rule that extralabel drugs required a VCPR, which has always been the standard in-person definition. The agency didn't choose between a traditional VCPR and a virtual VCPR because no one raised the comparison back then.

The FDA has not reexamined the issue, even though the FDA's human health regulations recognize telemedicine except in the case of controlled drugs. (No veterinary telemedicine advocate supports using telemedicine for controlled drug prescriptions.)

Many observers are raising this question: Why doesn't the FDA evaluate the evidence and progress and at least initiate hearings to reexamine its anti-telemedicine regulations from 30 years ago? The topic may have a heartbeat, but no action is pending.

VPAs

The Colorado Board of Veterinary Medicine continues to work hard on evaluating and adopting regulations to implement the veterinary professional associate law passed by Colorado voters in November 2024. Proponents and opponents are at the table and, believe it or not, progress is being made, with implementation likely in 2026. Colorado State University is preparing to admit its first VPA master's degree class, and other states are watching. Colorado will serve as a pilot, allowing everyone to watch and learn.

Corporate Ownership and Private Equity

Critics continue to introduce legislation banning corporate ownership of veterinary practices, but they're not gaining ground. Two such bills failed in Texas, and one of them targeted private equity.

Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren has surfaced the topic in federal circles, and it's likely we'll see more of these measures in 2026 as Democrats, in particular, hope for success in an election year.

Veterinary medicine has grown accustomed to all forms of practice ownership, including corporate and private equity, and it's hard to see a range fire sweeping the legislative landscape in 2026. Still, it's too early to tell.

Artificial Intelligence

What more needs to be said that hasn't already appeared in hundreds of media outposts, podcasts and the like? Conversations started and, for the most part, stopped with ambitions for veterinary medicine to regulate AI. The discussions are healthy, but does any reader expect veterinary medicine to crack the nut of regulating artificial intelligence?

School Accreditation

Critics are growing frustrated with the veterinary school accreditor, the American Veterinary Medical Association's Council on Education. One leading school, Lincoln Memorial University, filed an antitrust action, and scores of schools decry the COE's March 2025 decision to heavily restrict the use of online learning technologies, particularly at a time of faculty shortages.

A group of existing and new programs, mainly distributive clinical models, are experiencing harsh prescriptive regulations and decisions by the COE. Meanwhile, public universities in six Southern states pulled out of the higher education accreditor process, and the White House issued a far-reaching executive order challenging current accreditation practices. Keep your eyes peeled for more accreditation activity in the fourth quarter.



MARK CUSHING
The Politics & Policy columnist is a political strategist, lawyer, founding partner of the Animal Policy Group and founding member of the Veterinary Virtual Care Association. Since 2004, he has specialized in animal health, animal welfare, and veterinary educational issues and accreditation. He is the author of *Pet Nation: The Inside Story of How Companion Animals Are Transforming Our Homes, Culture and Economy.*

Is There a Veterinarian Shortage?

This mention of shortages is short. The AVMA and some trade organizations say veterinarian shortages don't exist, but most others say yes. I side with former University of Florida Dean Dr. James W. Lloyd. His detailed data and time-honored economic rules say rising prices usually point to supply shortages, and veterinary medicine is no exception.

Barriers to Pet Ownership

The American Pet Products Association and Independence Pet Holdings are lobbying state and local governments to remove the most significant barrier to pet ownership: anti-pet housing policies. The effort will make it easier for the top two pet-owning demographics, millennials and Gen Zers, to own pets while they struggle to buy homes. The initiative will also help lower-income pet owners to maintain their freedom to enjoy the benefits of the human-animal bond. Any organization executive reading this should contact me to learn how you can help.

Last Word

Most of 2025 has found the pet industry uncertain about economic fundamentals and the pace of growth. Yet new players and technologies arrive at a steady rate, fueled by pet health care's secret sauce: Over half of our pets are owned by millennials and Gen Zers, and the percentage is growing. These generational cohorts grew up with pets, love pets, want more pets, expect pet health care to match human health care in its offerings, and will grow their pet household as soon as the real estate market opens up. Put differently, the pet industry's engine is the human-animal bond.

So, I say bring on 2026. If change and innovations are part of the package, then all the better. TVB

LEARN MORE

Check out these *Today's Veterinary Business* articles, all published earlier this year.

- Mark Cushing on "6 Steps for Reforming the Council on Education" go.navc.com/COE-TVB
- Dr. James W. Lloyd on "The Veterinary Market's Invisible Hand" go.navc.com/Invisible-Hand-TVB
- Dr. Petra K. Harms on "How to Weigh AI's Risks and Rewards" go.navc.com/AI-Tools-TVB

MONEY MATTERS

Plan Your Taxes Now to Avoid April Surprise

Waiting until the new year to look for savings can cost you dearly.

BY JASON CASTNER, CPA, CVA



Everyone thinks of March and April as tax season, and they aren't wrong. However, people who wait until the spring to address their federal and state taxes often miss opportunities to save significant money. Many of the best tax-reducing ideas, especially for veterinary practice owners, must be completed before the end of the current calendar year.

One of the key tenets of tax planning is defer, defer, defer. In other words, if you can push off paying taxes until next year, you can use the money that isn't going toward taxes to pay down debt, earn interest and reinvest in your practice. Many of the ideas I discuss below are tremendous opportunities worthy of discussion with your accountant or financial adviser.

Invest in Equipment

Practice owners ask me all the time, "Should I buy equipment this year to save on taxes?" My answer is always, "Maybe." You should buy equipment when your practice needs it to continue providing excellent veterinary care or because it will enable new services in response to client demand. In that case, saving on taxes is a fantastic financial, albeit secondary, benefit.

Before you consider purchasing equipment, ask yourself, "Is it a toy or a tool?" Your answer should depend on the specific equipment and how you will use it. Too many times, I have seen practice owners buy an ultrasound machine or therapy laser to receive a large tax deduction. They then neglect to implement the necessary training or formulate a plan to recommend or charge for the services.

I have seen my fair share of expensive coat hangers in the back rooms of veterinary practices because an owner's focus was on tax savings rather than improving the delivery of medicine.

To be clear, buying equipment that a practice needs is an excellent tax planning tip. Often, it is best to make the purchase decision in October so that you have plenty of time to select the best medical or computer equipment for your practice. The recently enacted One Big Beautiful Bill Act reaffirmed that practice owners will receive a dollar-for-dollar deduction for investments in equipment for the foreseeable future.

Retirement Plans

There has never been a better time to start a Safe Harbor 401(k) plan. Given the currently available deductions and credits, practice owners in tax brackets higher than 24% miss out by not having one in place. Money that you contribute to the plan from your paycheck can be tax-deductible, as can Safe Harbor employer contributions and

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profit-sharing payments. Recent tax law changes in the Secure 2.0 Act allow businesses to move from a SIMPLE plan to a Safe Harbor 401(k) midyear.

New plans will also allow for Roth contributions, which is a great option for employees in lower tax brackets. Other benefits include tax credits for setting up automatic enrollment and for employer contributions over the first several years, which can significantly offset the business cost.

A well-designed retirement plan provides recruiting and retention benefits in addition to financial savings. I recommend working with a certified financial planner who focuses on retirement plans to ensure you design one that fits best with your age, goals and practice.

Warning: Some financial advisers do not focus on business retirement plans and will not provide the best advice on the topic. While they might say they "have a guy in my office" who does it for them, you will want a professional who specializes in retirement plans.

Pay Vendor Bills and Employee Bonuses Before Dec. 31

If (and only if) your veterinary practice files federal taxes on the cash basis of accounting, you receive a tax deduction when you pay a bill. When outstanding bills typically would be paid in January, speeding up the timing of those payments results in a tax deduction a year sooner.

Paying a vendor bill can be done by check, an electronic transfer or by charging it to the practice's credit card. The IRS considers all those methods as "paid" for tax-deduction purposes.

Employee bonuses paid by year's end are also deductible expenses that year. Make sure the payments go through payroll.

One Big Beautiful Bill Act

President Trump signed the federal bill into law on July 4, 2025. Because of the legislation's immense scope, I will highlight only a few key takeaways that impact small businesses and individuals. Be sure to discuss any of these items with your tax preparer if you have questions about how they might affect you and your practice.



JASON CASTNER
The Money Matters columnist is the managing shareholder at Lacher McDonald & Co., CPAs and Consultants. He leads the firm's veterinary consulting segment, with a focus on practice profitability, financial consulting, and taxes and tax planning.

Business Impacts

- The pass-through entity tax (PTET) was unaffected, so there is no SALT limitation for pass-through entities. That is excellent news following early concerns that PTET would be limited or eliminated.
- The qualified business income (QBI) deduction remains at 20% and was made permanent. Practice owners are subject to income limitations. The bill increased the phaseout range for single and married taxpayers, making more people eligible to receive tax savings.
- Bonus depreciation has been phased down over the past several years. It is now permanent, and the allowance increased to 100% of property acquired and placed in service after Jan. 19, 2025.
- Employer payments of student loans under education assistance programs were made permanent and adjusted for inflation. The $5,250 maximum exclusion was set to expire after 2025.

Personal Impacts

- Tax Cuts and Jobs Act (TCJA) rates were made permanent. They were set to go up after 2025.
- The child tax credit increased to $2,200 per child. It was scheduled to revert to $1,000 after 2025.
- The estate and gift tax exemption rose to $15 million. It would have reverted to $5 million after 2025.
- The state and local tax (SALT) cap jumped from $10,000 to $40,000 for 2025 and increases 1% each year.
- Energy credits now expire at the end of 2025. These were set to continue for several years.

The recent tax act contained so many tax-planning opportunities and changes that I cannot address everything. My main takeaway for you is to start planning now. Meet with your accountant, and potentially your financial adviser, to ensure you are well-prepared for tax season. TVB

LEARN MORE

Financial Wellness co-columnists Geoff S. Huber and Fritz Wood explore the latest retirement plan laws and updates on Page 80.

EMBRACING ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Who's on Your Success Team?

A select squad of business professionals can assist aspiring practice owners in achieving their entrepreneurial dream.

BY PETER WEINSTEIN, DVM, MBA



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Building a thriving veterinary practice, whether through acquisition, a de novo startup or in the nascent stages of ownership, demands more than just clinical prowess. It also requires a robust support system — a success team — comprising individuals with specialized expertise that complements the entrepreneur's own. With that in mind, this is the first in a two-part article on who should be on your success team.

The path to successful practice ownership is fraught with complexities, from navigating financial intricacies to establishing operational efficiencies and fostering a positive work environment. Identifying invaluable team members, finding them and understanding their roles in the journey are critical for long-term viability and growth and are imperative for success.

Part 1 focuses on the people you need on board from the beginning. Your crew includes:

- A coach, mentor and consultant
- A demographic specialist
- An attorney (probably more than one)
- A business broker or veterinary transactional specialist
- An accountant
- An architect, contractor, space planner and/or interior designer
- A knowledgeable banker

Part 2 will appear in the December/January issue and will explore working with:

- A marketing agency to help with branding, imaging and promotions
- Insurance agents or brokers for business and professional liability coverage
- Health insurance brokers
- IT specialists
- A financial planner
- A payroll company

Coaches, Mentors and Consultants

These professionals will answer your questions, evaluate your vision, introduce you to other experts and resources, and guide you from where you are to where you want to go. Many of them will be there in a support role after your veterinary practice opens.

Mentors are experienced veterinarians, ideally practice owners, who have successfully navigated the challenges entrepreneurs face or will face.

Practice management consultants bring a wealth of experience in optimizing hospital operations, marketing, human resources and client communication. They provide objective advice and actionable strategies. Some specialize in specific areas, like HR, marketing or financial benchmarks.

A fourth resource worthy of consideration is a peer group consisting of other practice owners. They meet regularly to share experiences, offer advice and provide mutual support.

I recommend utilizing all these individuals for these reasons:

- **Practical wisdom and guidance:** Benefit from their real-world experience.
- **Strategic planning:** Develop a robust business plan and long-term vision for your practice.
- **Networking opportunities:** Gain access to valuable industry connections.



BACK TO SCHOOL

The UC Davis Graduate School of Management offers an executive education course called Foundations of Veterinary Business. The next opportunity starts in May 2026. Learn more at bit.ly/4lpY8gQ.

- **Emotional support and accountability:** Receive encouragement and stay on track.
- **Problem-solving:** Get assistance in overcoming challenges.
- **Operational efficiency:** Optimize clinic workflows and processes.
- **Marketing and client growth:** Develop strategies to attract and retain clients.
- **Human resources and employee development:** Build and manage a strong, cohesive team.
- **Financial benchmarking:** Understand your practice's performance relative to industry standards.

Demographic Specialist

Whether you plan a startup practice or an acquisition, a crucial early step is ensuring your practice's location will support a long-term business entity. Many variables go into identifying the right spot, so calling on an expert's assistance is vital. Even evaluating an existing practice's site can help you make a wise purchase decision. Communities change over time, and what was a gold mine 30 years ago could be a land mine today.

For a veterinary entrepreneur, utilizing a veterinary-specific demographic specialist is paramount. These professionals go beyond population data by offering granular insights. They provide detailed reports on local pet ownership rates, including the prevalent species, to inform your service offerings. Crucially, they analyze household income levels and pet ages within the target area to reveal the economic capacity for veterinary care and the potential demand for specific services, such as wellness plans or geriatric care.

Real estate lawyers handle property acquisitions, commercial leases and zoning compliance, ensuring your physical location is legally secure.

Moreover, demographic specialists meticulously assess the competitive landscape, mapping veterinary hospitals, pet stores and animal shelters to determine market saturation and the capacity for a new practice. This task enables them to pinpoint underserved areas ripe for a new clinic and to project growth potential by identifying new housing developments.

Finally, they factor in practical considerations, like visibility, accessibility and zoning regulations, to ensure the location is demographically sound and operationally feasible. This comprehensive analysis mitigates risks and optimizes your practice's long-term viability.

By investing in a demographics specialist, veterinarians can make informed, strategic decisions about a practice's location, significantly increasing their chances of success.

Attorneys

Having a team of specialized attorneys is nonnegotiable for a veterinary entrepreneur.

An entity formation attorney will advise on the optimal legal structure for your practice (for example, sole proprietorship, partnership, LLC or S corporation), which impacts liability, taxation and administrative burdens.

Contract attorneys are crucial for drafting, reviewing and negotiating all agreements, including the purchase arrangement for an existing practice, vendor contracts, equipment leases and noncompete clauses.

Real estate lawyers handle property acquisitions, commercial leases and zoning compliance, ensuring your physical location is legally secure.

Finally, human resources attorneys are vital for navigating a state's complex employment laws and assisting with hiring practices, employment agreements, wage and hour compliance, employee handbooks and termination procedures. They also help with potential HR disputes, safeguarding your business from significant legal liabilities.

A general attorney might understand business law, but a veterinary-specific attorney deeply understands the regulatory landscape governing veterinary medicine, such as patient record transfers and DVM noncompete clauses during a practice sale and compliance with a veterinary medical board.

Business Broker or Veterinary Transactional Specialist

For entrepreneurs looking to acquire an existing practice, a specialized business broker or veterinary transactional specialist is indispensable. They possess an intimate understanding of the veterinary market, allowing them to accurately appraise practices, ensuring you pay a fair price and understand the actual value of the assets and goodwill. They act as intermediaries, identifying suitable practices that match your vision, negotiating the purchase terms and structuring the deal to be advantageous for you.

Beyond negotiation, they guide you through due diligence, coordinate with attorneys and accountants, and manage the complex paperwork required for a smooth and efficient transfer of ownership, saving you immense time and mitigating potential pitfalls.

Veterinary transactional specialists live and breathe the veterinary market. They possess unparalleled knowledge of practice valuations and understand add-backs and the intangible assets (like goodwill and client loyalty) that truly drive value. They maintain extensive networks within the veterinary community, connecting you with appropriate buyers or sellers, including corporate groups, and can negotiate terms that reflect industry benchmarks and nuances. Their specialization enables them to secure more favorable deals, streamline complex processes and prevent common industry-specific missteps that a general business broker might overlook.

Accountant

A skilled accountant is fundamental to the

OTHER POTENTIAL TEAMMATES



- American Veterinary Medical Law Association: avmla.org
- Independent Veterinary Practitioners Association: iveterinarians.org
- PSIvet: psivet.com
- The Veterinary Cooperative: theveterinarycooperative.coop
- Veterinary Management Groups: myvmg.com
- Veterinary Ownership Advocates: veterinaryownershipadvocates.com
- VetPartners: vetpartners.org

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financial health and compliance of your veterinary practice. These professionals establish robust accounting systems, whether you're starting from scratch or integrating an existing practice's books. Their expertise extends to accurate bookkeeping, managing payroll, preparing financial statements, and conducting thorough financial due diligence on an existing practice to verify its profitability and uncover any hidden liabilities before the purchase. Crucially, they provide strategic tax planning advice, ensuring your business minimizes its tax burden legally, and handle all federal, state and local filings to keep your practice compliant with all laws.

Veterinary-specific accountants understand a practice's unique revenue streams and common expense categories. They can accurately benchmark your practice's performance against industry averages, helping you identify areas for improvement or potential red flags during due diligence. Their expertise allows for more precise tax planning tailored to the veterinary profession, ensuring you maximize deductions and credits specific to the industry, ultimately optimizing profitability and reducing tax liabilities far more effectively than a general accountant.

Architect, Contractor, Space Planner and/or Interior Designer

These professionals are crucial for creating a functional, compliant and appealing veterinary hospital, whether it's a startup or a practice in need of significant renovation.

An architect designs the overall building or interior layout, ensuring efficient workflow for staff, separate patient zones, such as quiet cat rooms and noisy dog wards, and adherence with local building codes, including accessibility requirements.

A contractor manages the construction process, ensuring it stays on schedule and budget.

A space planner optimizes every square foot.

An interior designer selects the finishes, lighting and furniture to create a welcoming, professional and durable environment that reduces stress on animals and clients and reflects your practice's brand.

Veterinary-specific designers and contractors understand the specialized needs of an animal care facility, such as durable, nonslip, easy-to-clean floors, ventilation systems that control odors and airborne pathogens, soundproof materials for animal comfort, and appropriate zones for different pet species. They know the dimensions required for surgical suites, diagnostic imaging rooms and kennel areas, ensuring regulatory compliance and efficient workflow. Their expertise translates into a facility that is aesthetically pleasing, highly functional, safe and built to withstand the demands of a veterinary environment.

Veterinary transactional specialists live and breathe the veterinary market.



PETER WEINSTEIN
The Embracing Entrepreneurship columnist is a leader, disruptor and change agent through his three companies: PAW Consulting, Simple Solutions for Vets and Veterinary Ownership Advocates. He teaches business and finance at the Western University College of Veterinary Medicine.

Banker

A banker who understands the veterinary industry's financial landscape is irreplaceable. These professions are more than loan officers; they are also financial partners. They can provide essential capital for your venture, whether to purchase an existing practice, fund a startup, acquire medical equipment or secure commercial real estate. These bankers are familiar with specialized lending programs, such as Small Business Administration loans, which often offer more favorable terms for practice acquisitions and startups. They can also advise on business checking accounts, lines of credit to provide working capital, and merchant services for processing client payments.

A banker specializing in veterinary practice finance speaks your language and understands the profession's nuances. They are familiar with the typical financial performance of veterinary clinics, the valuation methodologies used by brokers, and equipment and real estate needs. The understanding allows them to structure loan products tailored to the industry, often with more favorable terms, lower down payments and longer repayment periods than general business loans. They can also expedite the loan approval process due to their familiarity with industry benchmarks and risk factors, making financing for acquisitions or startups smoother and more accessible.

By recognizing the unique contributions of all these professionals and investing in their expertise, veterinarian entrepreneurs can significantly increase their chances of building a successful, sustainable business and enjoying a fulfilling career. TVB

PROTECT & DEFEND

9 Questions to Ask Your Insurance Agent

You need a trusted adviser who understands your practice and the veterinary industry.

BY BILL BUTLER, CIC, CISR, CWCA



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Your veterinary practice's insurance agent should do more than email your renewal notice once a year. The person should understand your business inside and out, anticipate risks before they become problems, and go to bat for you when the unexpected happens. Unfortunately, in today's name-your-price world, some practice owners treat insurance like a commodity — a box to check and a policy to purchase as quickly and cheaply as possible. That approach might save you a few dollars or several hours of your time, but it can cost you everything later.

The truth is that your insurance partner belongs on the same level as your accountant, attorney and practice consultant. Your agent is a key player on your professional board of directors, someone whose insight, experience and advocacy can all make the difference between a minor setback and a devastating loss.

Whether you're evaluating your current insurance relationship or interviewing a new agent, the following nine questions will help you separate the slick salesperson from the true professional.

1 Are You Fully Licensed?

Only licensed insurance agents can legally answer questions about and provide advice on products and services. An unlicensed insurance agency employee cannot offer advice on something as simple as a claim. In many circumstances, unlicensed staff will only be able to take a message and refer you to a licensed team member. Just like in the veterinary industry, licensed insurance staff must take continuing education.

2 Do You Represent Multiple Insurers?

The insurance industry has captive agents and independent agents (sometimes called brokers). Generally, captive agents represent only one insurance company and its products and services. Brokers and independent agents often represent multiple carriers. Working with an agent who understands your coverage needs and what various companies offer can help you get the best protection at a reasonable price.

3 Do You Offer Veterinary-Specific Insurance?

Not all insurance is created equally, so having a policy specifically designed to protect your practice is critical. Many times, an agent or agency will have a named insurance program in their specialization. The best example is AVMA PLIT and its veterinary industry products and services. Having niche insurance products or a suite of coverages can ensure better protection.

The good news is that purchasing an array of coverages often doesn't mean higher costs. Insurance carriers

offering a package for a specific industry usually do so without charging extra. That's because they understand the industry's risks.

4 How Often Will I Hear from You?

One of the common complaints I receive from prospective veterinary clients is, "I never hear from my insurance agent." While communication can take many forms, your agent should contact you, at a minimum, to advise you about the timing of your renewal policy and any additional coverages available to you. For example, many of the startup practices I work with purchase initial coverage to comply with lender and landlord requirements and add other coverages later.

At some point, your agent should reach out with additional options, like employment practice or cyber liability insurance, that may not be part of your current program. Also, the agent should communicate with you throughout the year to ask about changes in your practice, review payroll amounts for your workers' compensation policy and review equipment purchases.

5 Have You Fully Explained All My Coverages?

While most practice owners don't know every detail of their insurance policy, they should have a basic understanding of what is and isn't covered.

A common misconception is that an insurance policy covers everything. For example, I was reviewing a practice owner's insurance when I asked how much coverage he needed to replace all his equipment. He answered, "$1 million, easy." I informed him that his current policy capped out at $250,000.

Unfortunately, some agents replicate the coverage from one policy to the next without asking questions, explaining the limitations or looking for gaps.

YOUR NEXT STEPS

Take the nine questions to your meeting with your current or prospective insurance agent. Listen closely to the answers. You will know whether the person across the table is prepared, experienced and aligned with your needs. Don't settle for generic advice. Choose an agent who understands the veterinary industry and can keep promises when they matter most.



BILL BUTLER
The Protect & Defend columnist founded Butler Vet Insurance, which serves the veterinary and pet services industries. Before entering the insurance industry, he spent 12 years with the Minnesota Army National Guard and the U.S. Army. Learn more at butlervetinsurance.com.

6 Do You Have Flexible Payment Plans?

Now more than ever, insurance carriers provide billing options for small commercial accounts. In most cases, the practices I work with select a 12-installment plan and use a credit card. (We all need those airline miles, don't we?)

Some policies, however, offer limited payment options. When an insurance policy is direct-billed, it goes from the insurance company to the practice. In the case of an agency-billed policy, the agency collects the premium from you and pays the carrier on your practice's behalf. With agency-billed accounts, the annual premium is generally due when the policy is issued. Some paid-in-full accounts may use a finance company, an option you can discuss with your agent.

7 Are You a Generalist?

An agency that insures just one or two veterinary practices might not understand your clinic's unique needs. These generalists will work with any business needing insurance, not just you and practices like yours. Insurance professionals who specialize in veterinarians and practice insurance have a better understanding of your scope of work and the coverages your practice needs.

8 How Active Are You in the Veterinary Industry?

While insuring a handful of veterinary practices is good, does the company attend state and national veterinary conferences? Does it provide continuing education to veterinarians and practice owners? Is it active with groups like the Veterinary Business Management Association? While such participation isn't required, your agent should show a higher level of commitment to the veterinary profession and understand the latest trends and hurdles to provide better products and services.

9 Can You Provide Testimonials or a List of Satisfied Practices?

A positive client testimonial goes a long way in proving that an insurance agent or agency understands the veterinary industry. Being unable to provide veterinary-specific testimonials or references doesn't mean an agent is bad, only that the person might not be as experienced as you want.

Choosing the proper insurance agent for your veterinary practice isn't just about finding a cheap premium; it's also about choosing a partner who understands your business, anticipates your risks and stands beside you when the unexpected happens.

Hiring the wrong partner can undo years of hard work in a single claim. Hiring the right one can give you the confidence to focus on what you do best — caring for animals and leading your team — and to know that your practice is protected. TVB

CREATIVE DISRUPTION

Make Secondary Care Second Nature

Don't underestimate what general practitioners are capable of.

BY BOB LESTER, DVM

The scope of general practice has been shrinking for decades. Slowly, quietly and sometimes with just a shrug, we GPs have allowed it to dwindle. Expanding or re-expanding the scope of veterinary practice isn't just possible, it's also necessary. Why? Because when we stretch ourselves clinically, we improve access to care, open new opportunities for our teams, strengthen the financial health of our practices and (maybe most importantly) reignite our passion for our work. And let's not forget that one of the most significant contributors to burnout is a lack of challenge.

What Is the Scope of Practice Anyway?

A quick refresher. The scope of practice is what you're legally allowed and professionally competent to do. Your state's legislature defines it in statute, your licensing board sets rules, and your training and experience provide the skills. Licensed DVMs and VMDs are the only individuals who can diagnose, prescribe, prognose and perform surgery. That's our lane. But under our supervision, with proper training, our teams can do just about everything else.

There's no single cookie-cutter scope that applies to every GP or every practice. One clinician's bread-and-butter might be another's hard pass. That's OK. Scope is dynamic. It evolves with experience, confidence and continuing education. The real question isn't what's allowed but what's possible.



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In Praise of GPs

Full disclosure: I'm biased. I love general practice and always have. GPs are the glue that holds our profession together. GPs are adept at building relationships, making do with less and achieving the maximal result with often limited means. Hippocrates said, "It's more important to know the patient who has the disease than the disease the patient has." We're the ones who get the first call and deal with everything that follows. We see patients from birth to earth. We're nimble, we adapt, and we make a difference.

Two-thirds of U.S. veterinarians are general practitioners. In human medicine? That number is closer to one-third. And here's the deal: More primary care means better health outcomes at lower costs. It's true in people and pets.

I'm not trying to throw shade on my specialist friends. I've got immense respect for our colleagues in specialty care. They trained long and hard, and they bring invaluable expertise to the table. I'm grateful for my ability to consult them and refer to them. But it's fair to ask this: Are GPs sometimes outsourcing cases we can handle ourselves? Several specialists have told me they'd prefer that we not refer less complicated cases. They're even happy to coach us on how to keep those cases in-house.

Why the Shrinking Scope?

Let's unpack things. Why has general practice narrowed its focus? First, the rise of specialization. When I graduated last century, we had about 2,000 boarded specialists. Today? North of 17,000. The ratio of specialists to GPs has tightened from about 1-to-20 to 1-to-10. Add to that an explosion in medical knowledge, rising client expectations, a fear of social media and state boards, and a lack of confidence.

We've also internalized some often-unhelpful messaging. Many of us were trained at referral teaching hospitals, where the default belief was, well, refer cases to them. Combine that with dwindling mentorship from retiring boomer-era GPs who came of age in a time when GPs, by necessity, did everything. It's no wonder we've backed away from complex cases.

The result? General practitioners

LEARN MORE

Check out the American Animal Hospital Association's *2025 AAHA Referral Guidelines* at bit.ly/4mqWrQW.



DR. BOB LESTER
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are leaning hard into wellness care, preventive care, chronic disease management and first-line diagnoses. These are all worthy and necessary, but they're not the whole story. We can — and should — do more.

Say Hello to Secondary Care

Between the familiar territory of primary care and the rarified air of tertiary care lies an exciting middle ground: secondary care. Let's break it down shown in the table below.

Now, here's the beauty of it all: GPs get first dibs on secondary care! It's ours to claim and is tailored to our interests, teams, skills and clients. You define what secondary care looks like in your practice. How cool is that?

What's in Your Column?

If you're a GP, you don't need to do it all. But you can do more than you think. Here are a few ideas:

- **Surgical cases:** Uncomplicated fracture repair, extracapsular cruciate, enucleations, cystotomies, foreign-body removal, gastrotomy, enterotomy, gastropexy, pyometras, BOAS repair
- **Internal medicine:** Diabetes mellitus management, hypo/hyperthyroidism, chronic kidney disease, IMHA
- **Dermatology:** Allergy management, chronic otitis
- **Ophthalmology:** Simple corneal ulcers, cherry eye
- **Dentistry:** Full-mouth radiographs and extractions, basic periodontal management, complex extractions
- **Diagnostic imaging:** Abdominal ultrasound, thoracic radiographs
- **Other:** Behavior, rehabilitation, exotics, urgent care

Where can you start? How about with confidence, continuing education and case selection? Do you want to grow your skill set? Then invest in training and technology for you and your team. Attend that wet lab. Buy the equipment. Shadow a colleague. Start small and scale smart.

Workflows matter, too. Delegation is key. Let your team shine. Strengthen client education. Collaborate with specialists and bring them into your practice whenever possible.

In short, do more sick care and less well care. Rely on your team for well care. Help more pets. Challenge yourself.

Everybody Wins

We all win when we expand the scope of general practice and reclaim secondary care. For example:

- Pets and families gain broader access to quality care, without added costs or referral logistics.
- Teams are empowered to work at the top of their training.
- Practices grow revenue and relevance.
- Clinicians find renewed purpose and professional joy.

We GPs are more capable than we give ourselves credit for. Let's rise to the top of our training and challenge ourselves. Pets need us, clients trust us, and our teams are ready. Secondary care is our job if we want it.

So, what's in your secondary care column? TVB

SECOND CHANCES

	Primary Care	Secondary Care	Tertiary Care
Who	Licensed veterinarians and technicians	TBD	Boarded specialist
What	Routine cases	TBD	Highly complex cases
Where	General clinic or mobile practice	TBD	Veterinary teaching hospitals and referral centers
When	First point of contact	TBD	Upon referral
Access	Direct client	TBD	Referral-based
Goal	Prevent illness, maintain health and early intervention	TBD	Cutting-edge interventions
Relationship	Long term	TBD	Limited

PRACTICE SMARTER

How to Level Up Your Team

Practices excel and career paths become clearer when employee training is well-defined and not left to the imagination.

BY MIRA JOHNSON, CPA, CVPM, MBA



In my early years, I worked for an airline in a small city. The best part about a small-city airport is that, as an airline employee, you do it all, which is good because you learn a lot and see how everything works. That meant checking in passengers, loading luggage, managing the boarding process and even deicing aircraft. Yes, you do a lot. And as with any job where the responsibilities are endless, so is the required training.

According to *Forbes*, employers that invest in formalized worker training programs yield a substantial increase in company income per employee. The article went on to say that companies with formal training programs see a 218% higher yield compared to companies without them.

The keyword is "formal." If your veterinary practice does not have a formalized written training program, now is the time to develop one. It will increase revenue and enhance employee retention and productivity.

Level It Up

The airline I worked for provided excellent training. First, we learned the easy tasks to get us started — how to load luggage into the aircraft, how to operate the motorized equipment and how to marshal the plane to the gate.

Consider this when designing training for each position in your practice: What can people quickly learn to boost their confidence and help them feel valued? For a receptionist, Level 1 would be as basic as learning to greet pet owners and schedule appointments. For a veterinary assistant, it could be how to clean cages and walk patients. If you don't formally share your expectations, how will they ever know? There is no need to push harder if the basics don't stick. A well-written program, accompanied by a mentor, trainer or assigned buddy, helps move the needle.

Once someone masters the basics, it's time to move to the next phase. In the airline industry, leveling up meant weeks of intensive training about software, rules and regulations, and deicing procedures. After that, specialized training might cover topics such as accepting different types of cargo, tracking lost luggage, assisting unaccompanied minors, knowing which oxygen devices are allowed on aircraft, and issuing vouchers to unfortunate passengers on canceled flights.

You can apply the same concepts in your practice. Level 2 can build intermediate skills and result in greater autonomy. For the receptionist, the training might include handling client complaints, processing end-of-day reconciliations and overseeing client

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reminders. For a veterinary assistant, Level 2 may involve performing standard laboratory tests and filing prescriptions.

Once they master Level 2, the goal is to tackle Level 3, and so on.

For the entire process to work, you must put it in writing. Start by listing each job's skills and responsibilities, prioritize them, and then divide them into levels. No training program is set in stone. You might realize that the order isn't quite right, that processes have changed, or that you need to add or subtract a task. The more detail is better, as it certainly makes changes and improvements easier to address.

Establish Advancement Criteria

In the airline industry, those who completed specific skills earned a certification. While you don't have to be that fancy in a veterinary clinic, a checklist of completed skills requiring a trainer's signature of approval is a great way to set goals and monitor results.

When I was a veterinary practice manager, the trainers were coached on how to sign off on various tasks. They learned which questions to ask the trainee. If a specific skill required a demonstration, the doctor or lead technician would follow the directions on the checklist.

If a team member didn't complete the training as anticipated, the trainer would sit down with the person and discuss what needed to be done.

During my airline days, I noticed that some people with 10 years' experience were stuck at Level 1. No one pushed them to advance to Level 2 because the training was at the employee's pace and lacked deadlines.

You might find long-term employees like that at your practice. Therefore, consider adding training time frames. While competency is the main objective, it's wise to set a deadline for the completion of each phase.



MIRA JOHNSON
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Reward Progress

I received an automatic raise every year when I worked for the airline. Everyone got one on their anniversary date. It was the company's way of thanking you for being part of the airline family. The pay scale was an open book, and everyone knew what their raise would be next year.

It took me a few years to discover an apparent disconnect between skills and rewards. Airline employees stuck on Level 1 for 10 years were being rewarded more than I was, even though I had attended every training session, took on more responsibilities and was constantly busy. When cargo arrived, I was often the only employee who knew how to process it. When the plane broke down, I was frequently one of the few who knew how to rebook passengers' flights. When a drunk passenger was at the gate, I was often the only one who could handle the situation. My radio was always on.

Unfortunately, some of my co-workers sat and waited for the next plane to arrive so that they could then unload and load luggage, as if that was all they knew how to do. How do you think that made high performers like me feel? Within five years I turned down the opportunity for additional training — a weather class.

Do you have skilled employees who are always willing to take on more responsibilities? Nurture your team members by tying advancement through the training levels to a solid reward program. Once an employee levels up, they earn a raise or another incentive. You establish the amount or outcome, and everybody knows it. Employees who level up are more beneficial to your practice and are motivated to continue learning and improving. TVB

AT THEIR LEVEL BEST

A well-designed leveling program offers numerous benefits for the veterinary practice and team. They include:

- **Motivation and a transparent career path:** Employees are aware of the knowledge or skills they need to acquire to progress in their job.
- **Fair and predictable compensation:** When each level is tied to a predefined pay rate or raise, team members know how to get there.
- **Better hiring and onboarding decisions:** When you bring in new team members, a leveling system is an easy way to assess skill levels and pay fair wages.
- **Consistency in training and standards:** A phased training program helps ensure that every employee learns to meet the same standards at each level.
- **Employee engagement and retention:** Team members will experience a sense of progression and accomplishment as they move through the levels. Their progression can come with new job titles, such as junior receptionist, senior receptionist, guru receptionist and lead receptionist.





A GOOD GOODBYE

Veterinary teams are redefining the euthanasia experience for the better.

BY ANGELA BEAL, DVM, FFCP

Like many childhood pets, Ben was Ron Weese's best friend. The Weese family raised the puppy from birth, and Ben and Ron were inseparable. When Ben's health deteriorated, Ron's father handed him a pistol and said, "You know what you need to do."

Ron wasn't mentally prepared to end Ben's life. However, as a pre-teen in rural Ohio during the '80s, the act was an informal rite of passage. "I had a job to do and a hole to dig," he said. "We never had a lot of money, and that was the cheapest, easiest route."

His more recent loss, involving his Labrador retriever, Hank, was an entirely different experience. When Hank's mobility began to decline, Ron and his wife, Chris, exhausted all the options. "It wasn't for lack of trying," Chris said. "We started with meloxicam, and then we added gabapentin, and then tramadol and melatonin to help him sleep."

The family eventually sought in-home chiropractic care and acupuncture when the medications no longer provided a sufficient quality of life for Hank. However, when the Lab also developed cognitive dysfunction, the Weeses decided it was time. They made an appointment at a veterinary hospital where a friend had had a good experience.

On a snowy February day, the Weese family was ushered into the hospital's comfort room. "It was appropriate that it snowed that day because Hank loved the snow," Chris said. "He got to make his last snow angel."

After feeding Hank a Fudgsicle, popcorn and a hospital-donated Reese's peanut butter heart, the Weeses said goodbye to their beloved pet. "They gave us as much time as we wanted," Chris said. "There was no hurry. They gave us a doorbell buzzer and told us to let them know when we were ready."

The Weeses paid to have Hank privately cremated rather than communally incinerated. His ashes reside at home in a stained wood box alongside a clay paw print made by the veterinary practice staff.

The Evolution of Euthanasia

Although Ron Weese's childhood experience with Ben isn't typical today, the two episodes illustrate how the human-animal bond — and society's view of a "good death" — have changed. The Weeses undoubtedly loved Ben and did their best in the '80s to provide a quick, pain-free death for their loyal pet. However, Ron knew he wanted something different for Hank.

Euthanasia has long been part of pet ownership. Well before the American Veterinary Medical Association developed its first euthanasia guidelines in 1963, veterinarians assisted animals in passing peacefully.

Although the technical methods used — drugs, doses and means of administration — have changed little over the decades, the experience has improved considerably. A thoughtfully planned event has gradually replaced a quick venous injection of pentobarbital given in a sterile exam room.

Whereas previous veterinarians likely focused on quickly relieving their patients' suffering and returning to a busy schedule of appointments, today's veterinary teams focus on the entire euthanasia experience — from scheduling and preparation to aftercare options and follow-up communication — to ensure a peaceful passing and to create positive memories.



Ron Weese made the difficult decision to have his ailing dog, Hank, euthanized.

Photo courtesy of Chris Weese

Dr. Joseph Crock, who practiced for over 45 years in central Ohio before retiring in 2020, performed hundreds of euthanasias. "I generally used the same drugs and techniques," he said. "But, over time, I got to where I pretty much let the pet owners do whatever they wanted during the appointments. If they wanted to hold the pet in their lap or sit with it on the floor, that was fine with me. I wanted the experience to be as good as possible."

The changes Dr. Crock made during his career and Ron's recent experience illustrate the shift toward ensuring a peaceful, dignified end for pets and a positive encounter for their owners.

Here are a few examples of how veterinary teams have rethought the euthanasia experience to meet or exceed pet owners' expectations.

Providing a Better Client Experience

Practice leaders and staff have created a homier atmosphere to minimize distractions and ensure a client's last moments with a pet are as peaceful as possible. Many clinics have added comfort rooms, replacing plastic chairs and exam tables with soft lighting, calming music and comfortable furniture. Separate entrances allow emotionally drained pet owners to leave quietly. The payment is often collected upon arrival so a client doesn't have to stop at the front desk on the way out. Some hospitals post a sign notifying staff and other pet owners that a euthanasia appointment is in progress and asking them to minimize noise.

Offering a Better Pet Experience

Providing a good death involves more than relieving a pet's suffering. It also includes minimizing any anxiety and discomfort and helping the patient die with dignity.

Dr. Mary Gardner, the CEO and co-founder of Lap of Love, a veterinary

hospice and in-home euthanasia company, shared an early memory. "I was working at the Humane Society of Broward County to get experience," she said. "I was assisting in the surgical suite, and every now and then, I'd hear this voice say, 'Hold on. … Hi, handsome boy. Hello, beautiful angel.' One day, I looked down the hallway and there was the director of the humane society. Every time a dog walked by on its way to the euthanasia room, she would stop what she was doing and come out to love on them. Although shelter euthanasia is horrible, she made it a little bit better for each dog."

Moving Beyond the Clinic

Farm veterinarians euthanize family pets from time to time, but in-home euthanasia is a relatively new concept.

Former CEO Dr. Dani McVety recalled the visit that led to Lap of Love's in-home euthanasia service. "A woman called and asked, 'Will anyone come to my house to euthanize my German shepherd? He's never aggressive, but he's hurt and he's biting me,'" Dr. McVety recounted. "The tech said, 'There's nothing like that available. You're going to have to get him in the car.' She arrived at the clinic an hour later with her hand torn open from the dog. She had to go from her dog's euthanasia to the emergency room. And I thought, 'I've got to go to the house.'"

COUNTERING ECONOMIC EUTHANASIA

iVet360's *2025 Veterinary Industry Benchmark Report* stated: "Our iVET360 analysts are seeing a rise in euthanasia cases where cost, not care, was the deciding factor. As financial pressure grows, clients are walking away from treatment their pets need. It's devastating and preventable. That's why insurance should be a standard conversation, especially with new and younger pet owners."

In-home euthanasia provides an alternative for families unable to transport a sick or injured pet to a veterinary hospital. The service also allows euthanasia to be performed wherever pets and their families feel most comfortable. Clients can plan every detail of their pet's passing, from the location in the home to who is present.

Caring For the Remains

While some families choose to bury their pets in the backyard, private cremations provide a tangible reminder. According to Dr. McVety, the decision of whether to choose a communal or individual cremation has little to do with finances. "It's definitely not a choice based on financial availability," she said. "People will do anything they can to have the ashes of their dog if that's what they want."

Honoring a Pet's Memory

Other options have emerged to help clients remember their beloved pets. Those who desire a physical reminder can have jewelry made from a pet's ashes or opt for an ash-infused ink tattoo. Families wanting a more spiritual reminder might opt to plant a tree or design a garden memory stone.

Ensuring a Better Euthanasia Experience

A negative euthanasia encounter can quickly erode the veterinarian-client relationship, said Dr. McVety. "Most of the time, the clinic didn't do anything wrong — it was just a bad experience for the client," she said. "They don't want to put their dog in the car or their cat in the carrier. They know they're going to drive home without their pet. Maybe the receptionist didn't smile and say, 'I'm sorry,' when they walked in."

With so much at stake, planning a positive experience is critical for veterinary practices. Here are 10 ways to provide a positive euthanasia experience.

1 Prepare Clients as Their Pets Age

Proactively communicating with clients about a pet's life expectancy helps ensure the animal receives veterinary care throughout its senior years.

"The vast majority of geriatric pets we see have not been to the vet in one to two years because owners don't want to spend $1,500 to be told their pet has arthritis, which they already know," Dr. McVety said. "When pets become 8 or 10 years old, general practitioners should say, 'You're not there yet, but in the coming years, your dog's going to

THE CASE FOR EUTHANASIA

The American Veterinary Medical Association's most recent update of its *Guidelines for the Euthanasia of Animals* occurred in 2020. They read, in part: "When the decision has been made to euthanize and the goal is to minimize pain, distress and negative effect to the animal, the humaneness of the technique (i.e., how we bring about the death of animals) is also an important ethical issue. As veterinarians and human beings it is our responsibility to ensure that if an animal's life is to be taken, it is done with the highest degree of respect, and with an emphasis on making the death as painless and distress-free as possible." The complete document is at bit.ly/3G0SyGs.

slow down. Eventually, it will be in hospice. That means we're going to make sure your dog is comfortable and happy, and you'll know what to expect. I'm not going to try to talk you into a bunch of crazy stuff you don't want. You can come talk to me whenever, and I'm going to be here to listen.'"

2 Form a Compassionate Care Team

Dr. Gardner recommends having a dedicated team responsible for ensuring that every aspect of the euthanasia experience is handled correctly. "If Rusty is coming at 2 p.m. today, the team members will have the room set up," she said. "They're going to get the paw print clay together, get the sedation ready to go, and make the ice cream sundae for him."

3 Be Flexible

Whenever possible, allow clients to dictate the course of the appointment. Allow them to hold the pet or sit on the floor with it instead of insisting that they use an exam table. Let clients spend as much time as they want with the patient before the euthanasia drugs are administered. Additionally, offer drop-off appointments for clients who are unable to handle seeing their pet euthanized. For pets that are large or have mobility issues, consider euthanizing them in the client's car.

"Those tiny things that seem insignificant to a veterinary team are extremely significant to the experience a client has," Dr. McVety said.

4 Communicate Throughout the Appointment

Although the Weese family had a generally positive experience, it could have been even better. "I wish she had explained more to us when they were doing it," Chris said. "She said, 'We're going to sedate him now,' but they didn't prepare us that his tongue was going to come out."

"It was routine for them, but it wasn't routine for us," husband Ron said.

Remember that euthanasia is not a regular occurrence for pet owners. Every euthanasia appointment should include a step-by-step explanation so that owners know what to expect and can ask questions.

5 Don't Judge

Veterinary teams must be careful not to critique a pet owner's choices about end-of-life care and euthanasia. People have widely differing opinions about death, which might be based on their experiences, beliefs or religious tenets.

6 Don't Separate the Pet From Its Family

Lap of Love asked pet owners about the factors that contributed to a bad euthanasia experience. "It wasn't agonal breathing, twitching, or that the vein exploded or the eyes were open," Dr. Gardner said. "The thing the families didn't like the most was having their pet taken away."

When a pet's minutes are numbered, most owners want to spend every last one with their prized companion. They don't want the animal taken to the treatment area for a catheter placement or other preparations. Although veterinary teams might balk at placing a catheter in front of an owner, leaving the pet in the room can go a long way toward ensuring the owner leaves the appointment with a positive impression.

"It's not about you," Dr. McVety said. "In this moment, impeccable service should be the goal, not making things perfect for the team."

7 Always Sedate the Patient

According to retired veterinarian Dr. Crock, one of the most significant additions to his euthanasia protocol was sedation. "I started sedating pets before giving the euthanasia solution, and it made the experience much better for the pets and the families," he said.



Hank's ashes and a paw print provide tangible memories of a life well-lived.

Photo courtesy of Chris Weese

FEWER SHELTER DEATHS

According to the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, "Approximately 607,000 animals were euthanized in shelters in 2024, decreasing by approximately 2% compared to 2023. In the past five years, euthanasia rates have dropped from 13% in 2019 to 8% in 2024."

Although pre-euthanasia sedation is standard at many veterinary practices, others still hesitate. Dr. McVety is often asked whether sedatives will lower a patient's blood pressure, making catheter placement difficult. "Sedatives reduce blood pressure in such a small way that it's not even noticeable unless you're doing something cardiac-related," she said.

Others might worry about the added cost of sedation or the time taken, but Dr. Gardner said the step is a worthwhile investment. She recounted attending a veterinary conference and watching a video of a euthanasia performed without sedation. "The vet pushed the euthanasia solution and the dog — a beautiful golden — fumbles, crumbles and dies," she said. "And I, the person who has performed thousands of euthanasias, am sitting in the room, crying. I need that sedation period. I don't want to see a dog go from life to death like that. It affected me, and a lot of people can't watch that either."

8 Provide a Memorial Item

Most pet owners appreciate receiving a paw print and fur clipping from their pet. "To a lot of people, the paw print is more meaningful than the ashes," Dr. McVety said. "It's the thing that sat on their lap that they've touched, they've held." She recommends providing a paw print at no charge. "Just do it or don't do it. But don't charge extra for it," she said.

If a paw print kit is too expensive, consider buying air-dry clay in bulk and training your team to create professional-quality impressions.

9 Send Follow-Up Communication

Dr. Gardner strongly encourages checking on clients after the procedure. "Don't be scared to communicate," she said. "We'll call a family the day after vaccines to see how they are, so let's call after the euthanasia. It's better to show you care."

She also recommends emailing those clients at regular intervals afterward. The day after a pet is euthanized, a simple message of condolence is appropriate. A week later, the message can include links to grief resources. On the first anniversary, let clients know you are thinking of them, and perhaps share a happy memory you have of their pet.



DR. ANGELA BEAL is a full-time veterinary industry writer and the chief operations officer at Rumpus Writing and Editing, a veterinary copywriting company. She lives in Columbus, Ohio, with her husband, two sons and their two Chihuahuas.

10 Take Euthanasia Out of Your Hospital

According to data gathered by Dr. Gardner, 90% of one-pet clients don't return to the euthanasia clinic within the next two years, although they likely adopt another animal during that time. That's a significant loss of business.

"[After a euthanasia], they don't want to drive past the clinic. They don't want to go in anymore," Dr. McVety said. "When you have euthanasia done somewhere other than the clinic, the client has a better feeling about the clinic, and they're more willing to go back when they get a puppy or kitten again. If I owned a general practice, I would do anything I could to get euthanasia outside the walls of that practice, even if it's on a blanket outside or in the car."

Outsourcing euthanasia to an in-home service is an option. "The $75 to $100 you're going to charge for the euthanasia is not worth losing that client," Dr. McVety said. TVB

HOW TO SUPPORT YOUR EMPLOYEES

Euthanasia can take a toll on team members, so a veterinary practice can help safeguard their mental health by caring for them during and after appointments. Here are three things you can do.

- **Educate everyone:** Team members, especially those who are new to the field, might not understand why euthanasia is a good choice for some pets. For example, they may question why you are euthanizing a cancer-stricken dog when the patient looks healthy and is eating. "Teaching teams quality-of-life assessments and why it's OK to say goodbye a little bit sooner than later can be helpful," said Dr. Mary Gardner, the CEO and co-founder of Lap of Love.
- **Create policies everyone can accept:** Ensure associate veterinarians are comfortable with your clinic's euthanasia policy so they don't feel pressured to euthanize healthy pets. Retired Ohio veterinarian Dr. Joseph Crock recounted a story from his early career about a woman with many cats who passed away. Her husband couldn't care for the cats and couldn't find a humane organization to take them, so he asked Dr. Crock to euthanize the animals. "I did it, but I felt awful about it and swore I'd never do something like that again," Dr. Crock recalled.
- **Check in with team members after euthanasia appointments:** Pet owners aren't the only ones affected by a patient's death. Take a moment to check in on team members after euthanasia appointments, especially if the pet was a long-time patient or one with whom a team member had formed a special bond.

IMPROVING CLIENT SERVICE: THE PERCEPTION VS. REALITY

Pet owners expect more than just competent veterinary care.

BY LOUISE S. DUNN



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Client service is a cornerstone of successful practice management. Yet, a disconnect can form between how veterinary professionals perceive the level of client service and the reality experienced by pet owners. Bridging the gap is essential, not only to strengthen client relationships but also to ensure better patient outcomes and business sustainability.

Case in point, a 2022 *Insiders' Insights* report from the Veterinary Hospital Managers Association addressed what clients want from a veterinary team. Interestingly, most veterinary responders believed that pet owners visit for quality medicine (57%), followed by customer service (27%), with convenience being a lesser priority at only 6%. The line of thinking is that service and convenience don't drive the client relationship.

Herein lies the crux of the matter: perception versus reality, and the lack of information.

A Vetsource article [bit.ly/40s5lp0] found "limited data on what pet owners want specifically in terms of the client experience." However, U.S. consumer surveys reveal these key factors:

- Speed
- Convenience
- Helpful employees
- Friendly service

All Hands on Deck

Good intentions and professional standards shape our perception of the veterinary industry. Extended hours, follow-up calls and modern equipment are standard, and team members take continuing education to ensure the medicine they practice remains at a high level. From that perspective, the client care appears robust and attentive. Yet, the pet owner's perspective isn't always so rosy. Long wait times, brief consultations, a lack of communication and confusion around treatment plans can erode trust in the veterinary team, even if the medical care is top tier.

In a world where convenience, transparency and personalization are highly valued, pet owners expect more than just competent veterinary care. They also want to feel seen, heard and involved in their cat or dog's wellness journey. A friendly front desk or a state-of-the-art facility is not enough if client communication falls short or emotional support is lacking. The genuine driver behind an exceptional pet owner experience often lies behind the scenes. It's staffing.

The right team, in the right roles and with the right support, can make or break the client journey. Yet, many practices struggle to understand how staffing directly influences the perceived and actual level of care that clients and patients receive. Understaffing can be just as detrimental to the client relationship as inadequately trained or poorly leveraged employees.

Understaffing leads to overworked employees, which in turn results in overlooked clients. Even the most skilled and compassionate team members can't deliver gold-standard care if they're running on fumes. An inadequately trained team can lead to miscommunication, longer wait times and inconsistent service, leaving clients feeling frustrated, undervalued and less confident in the care their pets receive. When team members aren't fully leveraged — they work below their training or license — the consequences can be inefficiency, rushed appointments and missed opportunities for client education. Those outcomes ultimately diminish the overall client experience and a pet owner's trust in the practice. Finding the correct mix and the proper balance is critical to providing the best patient care and client experience.

EXPERT ADVICE

Walmart founder Sam Walton once said, "There is only one boss. The customer. And he can fire everybody in the company from the chairman on down simply by spending his money somewhere else."

What You Can Do

Staffing solutions that improve client care and the pet owner experience can include one or all of the following:

- **Investing in support roles:** Hire or train client care coordinators or follow-up specialists to manage after-visit communication and client touchpoints. These support roles allow for more thoughtful, attentive care and can lead to a more relaxed and personalized client experience.
- **Fully leveraging veterinary technicians and assistants:** Empower them to educate, communicate and manage more of the client interaction, freeing veterinarians to focus on medical decision-making.
- **Cross-training to create flexibility:** Teaching employees multiple roles or skills enables better coverage during busy periods and reduces bottlenecks at the front desk or with phone call management.
- **Optimizing schedules:** Avoid overbooking appointments. Buffer times allow for meaningful client interaction and reduce the client's perception of being rushed.
- **Monitoring workload and burnout:** Happy teams provide better care. Regular check-ins, flexible work schedules and mental health support contribute to improved morale and enhanced client service. Consider having remote teams handle callbacks, appointment confirmations and telehealth consults. That way, pet owners receive timely

support without the bottlenecks arising from hectic clinic days, and the in-clinic team can focus more on patient care.

- **Listening to feedback:** Your team knows the pain points, so include your employees in problem-solving and decision-making to build sustainable solutions.
- **Monitoring the ease of doing business with you:** Ask clients about their interactions with your practice, and then work to reduce roadblocks and improve the convenience.

A Seamless Experience

Let's talk about convenience. It plays a crucial role in shaping a client's experience, and it's directly influenced by how well a practice is staffed and how efficiently the team operates. When staffing is optimized and team members are fully utilized within their skill sets, pet owners benefit from smoother scheduling, shorter wait times, faster follow-ups and clearer communication — all of which make doing business with the hospital easier and more satisfying.

A well-structured, well-leveraged team creates a seamless experience that respects clients' time and needs, reinforcing their trust in you and encouraging their long-term loyalty. Additionally, other forms of convenience can help your team deliver award-winning client care.

Here are 14 ways to make doing business with your team more convenient:

- **Online scheduling:** Allow pet owners to make appointments through your office's website or mobile app.
- **Subscription models:** Pet owners are accustomed to subscription-based services, such as streaming TV. Veterinary practices can do the same, making subscription services a powerful solution for navigating the money conversation. Predictable monthly payments for essential services support positive, solution-focused conversations.
- **Telemedicine:** Offer remote consultations in nonemergency cases. Virtual appointments can save clients time and reduce the stress of transporting a pet. Telemedicine also provides the benefit of remote work for employees.
- **Automation:** The convenience economy heavily relies on automation to streamline processes. For the team, it can reduce repetitive tasks, minimize errors and free up time for more meaningful client interactions.
- **Mobile apps, wearable health monitors and patient portals:** These offerings allow clients to access medical records, schedule appointments, request prescription refills, receive reminders, check a pet's health metrics and more. Such accessibility reduces phone calls to the clinic, minimizes information wait times, streamlines workflows, improves follow-through, and strengthens the perception of professionalism and responsiveness. The result is more client satisfaction and greater loyalty.

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LOUISE S. DUNN is a speaker, writer and the founder of Snowgoose Veterinary Management Consulting. She is Fear Free certified. Learn more at snowgoosevet.com.

- **Digital communication:** Texting, emails, social media and messaging apps keep clients informed about practice updates, pet health needs and in-clinic promotions, saving staff time.
- **E-commerce:** Clients and team members save time when pet owners can request drug refills online and receive medications and pet supplies by mail or a delivery service.
- **Curbside service:** It blossomed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Allow clients to check in and communicate with your team — and possibly witness in-vehicle veterinary care — without having to walk inside your clinic.
- **Flexible hours:** Consider extending your clinic's hours, including evenings and weekends, to accommodate busy clients. Using a third-party provider can reduce team burnout, improve morale and increase employee retention.
- **Payment options:** To streamline the invoice process, provide online and contactless payment systems. The option can help during sensitive financial discussions and reduce the time your practice spends chasing overdue accounts.
- **Home visits:** Offer them for pets that require medical attention but have difficulty traveling. Home visits can free up clinic space for more complex or urgent cases. You might want to partner with a third-party service provider.
- **Education and resources:** Share online articles and videos with pet owners to summarize common health issues. Removing the client's need to wait for office hours or a callback to get answers can improve compliance when you lay out the care visually. In addition, providing access to previsit forms, home-care guides and instructional videos can save time for the client and team.

- **Loyalty programs:** Implement those that reward clients for their continued patronage and referrals. Automatic rewards, streamlined checkouts and digital access to savings encourage routine visits, making doing business with your practice more efficient and financially predictable.
- **Personalization:** Leverage data and algorithms to personalize your products and services, enhance client convenience, and make the care a pet receives feel more relevant. The team benefits because personalization can reduce guesswork, improve workflow and standardize care protocols.

It's Your Choice

The convenience economy reflects the changing preferences and lifestyles of pet owners who prioritize time, efficiency and ease of use. Businesses that cater to those preferences can thrive in today's economic environment, while those that don't may face challenges in meeting client and team expectations.

Exploring ways to make your veterinary practice more convenient for pet owners is the key to building lasting relationships, improving compliance and standing out in a competitive market. By prioritizing client-friendly solutions, you show that your practice values the patient's well-being and the pet owner's experience. Convenience isn't just a nice-to-have. It's also a powerful tool for increasing client satisfaction, streamlining operations and delivering better care.

Make sure to implement the best staffing solutions. By aligning job roles, personal strengths and work schedules, practices can ensure they have the right mix of people to handle daily operations efficiently and stay responsive to client and patient needs.

Team members who feel supported and empowered will deliver the care clients remember for all the right reasons. TVB

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CREATING AN ECO-FRIENDLY VETERINARY PRACTICE

By adopting sustainable strategies, we can reduce ecological harm, safeguard public health and ensure a healthier future for all.

BY JENNY ALONGE, DVM



We've seen countless news stories about global climate change and its connection to wildfires, extreme rainfall, intense heat waves, and melting glaciers and ice sheets. Scientists predict even more profound effects unless action is taken everywhere to protect the Earth and its inhabitants. While everyone on the planet should be concerned about the escalating consequences of climate change, veterinarians have a responsibility to act. By taking the Veterinarian's Oath, we swore to conserve animal resources and promote public health. Our vow means we play a crucial role in mitigating climate change's impact and helping to ensure a healthier future for animals and people.

Dr. Diccon Westworth, a member of the Veterinary Sustainability Alliance leadership team, said the veterinary industry has numerous ecological impacts. These include waste pollution, microplastic eutrophication, land-use change, freshwater use and antimicrobial resistance. According to estimates, the U.S. health care industry accounts for about 8.5% of the nation's greenhouse gas emissions, almost double the global average.

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Registered veterinary nurse Terry George, a key member of the Australia-based group Vets for Climate Action, explained the three types of emissions:

- **Scope 1:** Emissions released by veterinary practices, such as volatile anesthetic gases and from fuel used in vehicles.
- **Scope 2:** Emissions from the burning of fossil fuels such as coal and gas. Practices indirectly contribute through the electricity, heating and cooling they purchase.
- **Scope 3:** Emissions produced by external suppliers, such as pet food and pharmaceutical companies.

How Sustainability Benefits Veterinary Practices

Implementing sustainable measures provides tangible advantages for practices, including:

- **Saving money:** Simple changes, such as switching to LED lights and reducing water waste, can optimize energy use and significantly reduce utility costs. Additionally, reducing single-use plastics and sourcing eco-friendly materials in bulk can decrease supply costs while minimizing waste. According to George, a 30-minute waste audit saved Australia's Brimbank Veterinary Clinic $500 over three months.
- **Attracting clients:** A survey by Colorado State University Professor Dr. Colleen Duncan, a member of the Veterinary Sustainability Alliance leadership team, found that 85% of pet owners believe climate change is real and that most believe the effects influence their pet's health. Most respondents also said they expect veterinarians to be knowledgeable about the topic and were willing to pay more for services from a sustainable clinic.
- **Improving employee satisfaction and retention:** People often feel more engaged and motivated when they work for a business that prioritizes ethical and sustainable practices. "People who care about this issue care a lot, and they feel better about their workplace when it has values and takes actions that align with their personal values," Dr. Duncan said. She also noted that involving interested team members in your sustainability efforts and integrating these tasks into their job descriptions can create opportunities for staff engagement and boost team morale.

Getting It Done

Becoming more environmentally sustainable might seem overwhelming, but organizations such as Vets for Climate Action and the Veterinary Sustainability Alliance offer resources to help facilitate the process.

Here are four strategies you can use to create a greener veterinary practice.

1 Form a Team

A dedicated green team can provide the collaboration needed to tackle the many actions required to make your clinic more sustainable. Dr. Westworth recommends involving employees from all departments to ensure a diverse range of perspectives and skills. The Northern California veterinarian also emphasized the importance of having management's support to enhance the coordination of resources and ideas.

2 Assess Your Clinic's Ecological Footprint

Audit your practice's energy usage, waste production and resource consumption to identify areas for improvement. The Veterinary Sustainability Alliance website offers a carbon calculator to help clinics account for their environmental and carbon impacts.

"Coming together and starting the conversation is one of the most important things," Dr. Duncan said. "It's important to take an inventory and determine which levers are available to pull."

Once you define the desired actions, establish measurable goals so you can determine whether your strategy is making the progress you want.

3 Implement High-Priority Sustainability Actions

A practice can take actionable steps by:

- Reducing energy consumption and switching to renewable sources.
- Sourcing eco-friendly supplies that use minimal packaging made from sustainable materials.

QUOTABLE

- **Australia veterinarian Dr. Jeremy Watson, who chairs a Vets for Climate Action advisory committee:** "Vet teams are guardians of and advocates for animal health. Being more sustainable is a practical way to reduce our impact on the environment and provides leadership and inspiration to pet owners, farmers and wildlife carers."
- **Colorado State University Professor Dr. Colleen Duncan, a member of the Veterinary Sustainability Alliance leadership team:** "Small things, like proper inventory management, can make a big difference. We all have things that get shoved in the back and then expire, creating waste. Some of the recommendations about making your practice more sustainable are simply ways to make your practice more efficient and less wasteful."

- Minimizing waste, including pharmaceutical leftovers, and reviewing waste management protocols.
- Enhancing water efficiency.
- Promoting sustainable transportation.

"Energy use and transport are the areas we have the most control over that make the biggest immediate impact," Dr. Westworth said. "In our practice, we transitioned to a 100% renewable solar and geothermal net-zero emission electricity source and purchased e-bikes for staff use."

George recommends vetting suppliers by asking:

- Do you measure your carbon footprint?
- Do you have an emissions target?
- Do you have an emissions-reduction plan?
- Do you purchase carbon credits?
- Do you have a sustainable packaging plan?
- Do you have a zero-emissions delivery plan?

Will moving toward a more sustainable practice impact the quality of veterinary care?

"The majority of your ecological footprint comes from non-veterinary factors," Dr. Duncan said. "No one is suggesting compromising patient care, but simply making some high-level behavior changes."

4 Build Awareness and Advocacy

According to the Veterinary Sustainability Alliance's "Pathway to a More Sustainable Clinic" downloadable poster [bit.ly/3HuSb4j], sustainability in veterinary medicine goes beyond implementing eco-friendly routines. Veterinary professionals should inspire others to achieve the same outcomes by:

- **Sharing your experience:** Discussing your sustainability journey can educate and motivate colleagues, clients and industry partners.
- **Building connections:** Engaging with professional networks, allied health sectors and sustainability-focused organizations fosters the exchange of ideas, resources and strategies.
- **Advocating for policy change:** Veterinarians have a unique platform to promote animal health, welfare and sustainability to key decision-makers. Advocating for greener legislation and ethical practices ensures a more sustainable future for everyone.

Sustainability in the veterinary industry is necessary to reduce the environmental impact and ensure the long-term health of animals, people and the planet. From reducing waste and energy consumption to advocating for greener policies, every step toward sustainability strengthens the future of veterinary care. TVB

WHAT YOUR PRACTICE CAN DO

Conserve resources by:

- Switching to LED lighting.
- Using motion sensors for lighting in low-traffic areas.
- Turning off equipment when it's not in use.
- Using programmable thermostats.
- Installing low-flow water fixtures.
- Installing solar panels or adopting renewable energy sources.

Reduce travel-related emissions by:

- Offering incentives to team members who switch to an electric vehicle, carpool or use public transportation.
- Purchasing supplies locally.
- Consolidating incoming shipments.
- Providing telemedicine to reduce client travel.

Choose sustainable products and vendors by:

- Transitioning to green anesthesia.
- Promoting eco-friendly pet products and food.
- Using natural fabrics instead of synthetic textiles.

Minimize waste by:

- Practicing good inventory management.
- Switching to reusable sharps containers.
- Rolling foil from suture and scalpel packets into a softball-sized ball for easier recycling.

LEARN MORE

MWI Animal Health sustainability initiative
mwiah.com/sustainability

Pet Sustainability Coalition
petsustainability.org

Vet Sustain
vetsustain.org

Veterinary Sustainability Alliance
veterinarysustainabilityalliance.org

Vets for Climate Action
vfca.org.au



DR. JENNY ALONGE spent 17 years as an ambulatory equine veterinarian, treating a diverse range of animals. In 2021, she pivoted her career to focus on veterinary writing, covering a wide array of topics.

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INSIDE:

60
TALK THE TALK
Getting A+ Service From Gen Z Employees

62
TAKE CHARGE
Making Patient Care Sustainably Affordable

"Providing a spectrum of care doesn't mean lowering your standards."

64
TALENT TERRITORY
Recruitment's Impact on Your Bottom Line

66
HR HUDDLE
When Are Employee Name Changes Valid?

LET'S TALK DRUGS

How to Clean Up Compliance Problems

Applying the SOAP concept to your management of controlled substances helps keep the DEA away.

BY KELLEY DETWEILER

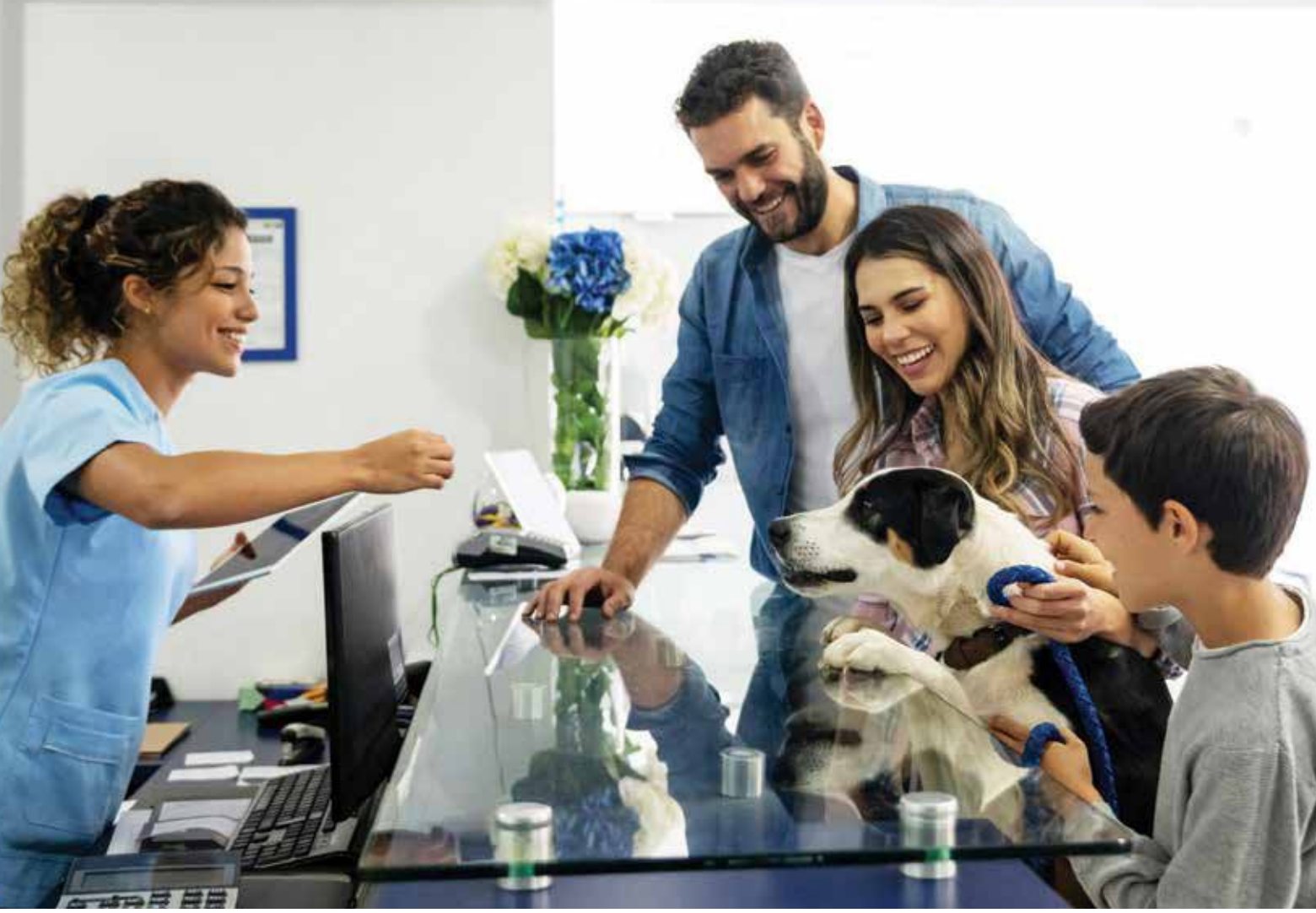
A medical director contacted me recently to ask for help with DEA compliance at a 24/7 emergency hospital. While I discussed the options, the veterinarian asked, "Wouldn't it be more productive to give me a list of problems and solutions?" If only it were that easy! I explained that the Controlled Substances Act and Title 21 of the Code of Federal Regulations set forth federal laws regarding controlled substances and that the issues veterinary professionals might experience are impossible to quantify into a list.

Like with a patient's health, compliance with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration can span a multitude of concerns and needs, with varying degrees of severity that are facility or operationally specific.

A common ailment among veterinary professionals is DEA noncompliance. I regularly hear:

- "The regulations are too confusing."
- "I don't have time."
- "None of this was taught in vet school."
- "Nobody else has been caught in my area."
- "What, me worry?"

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While those points might be valid, the reality is that neglecting DEA compliance can lead to serious and sometimes devastating consequences. Curing noncompliance is not a one-and-done task. It requires a solid plan and ongoing maintenance. In many ways, it's like patient health care.

Remember the exhortations during the pandemic to wash your hands thoroughly with soap to avoid getting and spreading COVID-19? In veterinary terms, SOAP notes are a structured record of a patient encounter, with the acronym standing for subjective, objective, assessment and plan. SOAP also may be used to identify and correct DEA compliance issues.

Your Patient

Think of DEA compliance, and specifically a DEA registration, as your patient. As a veterinary professional, you know that neglecting patient care can lead to undiagnosed or worsening conditions, even death. DEA compliance is no different. If you have a registration and don't do what is required to maintain the privilege, you set yourself up for negative professional and personal repercussions.

Many veterinary professionals have told me they don't know how to start working on DEA compliance. My recommendation is to do it the same way they would with a patient: by gathering information.

If you follow the SOAP method for patient documentation and treatment plans, you start by gathering information. The same is true in DEA compliance. What are the identifiable issues? Are any of them new or recurring? Have any notable changes occurred to operations, records or the drug inventory?

You also need to think about:

- Which team members do I trust to work with controlled substances?
- What products do I now have in inventory, and which ones will I have in the future?
- Do I have the correct logs, and do I know how to complete them?
- Which standard operating procedures are in place to order controlled substances, inventory them, and dispose of and destroy them?

Subjective

Signs and symptoms are part of the subjective information-gathering process. Symptoms of DEA noncompliance indicate an issue you must address immediately. Noncompliance can present in many forms. For example:

- Discrepancies between logbooks and inventory counts could be a symptom of mathematical errors and poor logging habits. Or they could be a sign of drug diversion.
- Containers of liquid controlled substances with excess fluid could be a symptom of manufacturer overfill. Or someone might be diverting the drug and replacing it with saline.
- Missing DEA Form 222s may indicate a lack of understanding that an original copy must be created and retained before submission to a supplier. Or it could be a warning of internal theft.

Treating symptoms when they arise is essential, but focusing solely on them is unlikely to cure DEA noncompliance. Treating the symptoms alone is ineffective because they might mask other issues.

Objective

Once you gather subjective information, the next step is an objective examination — the "O" in SOAP.

If you are unsure of your DEA compliance status, you must review the data, including required records such as logbooks, invoices, Form 222s and destruction documents. As you proceed, ask yourself, "Are patient log entries complete and balanced out?" and "Are all invoices and DEA Form 222s accounted for?"

Compliance records should tell the complete story of your controlled substances from the time of purchase, through usage, to when each container is depleted or expired and subsequently sent for final destruction. You have a good indicator of compliance when your records tell the whole story on their own. If they do not, you need to get to work by assessing your controlled substances compliance program.

Assessment

Now we're at "A" in SOAP — assessment. This phase involves using the information and data gathered during the subjective and objective steps to arrive at a diagnosis. During assessment, nonapplicable conditions are



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ruled out, and a short-term and long-term outlook or prognosis is made.

Diagnosing in the DEA compliance world means assessing each aspect of your controlled substances operations.

The terms "DEA inspection" and "DEA assessment" are often used interchangeably when referring to this process, which is essentially a physical evaluation of how compliant your controlled substance operations are. Compliance assessments are routinely conducted by the DEA, state pharmacy boards and veterinary medical boards, depending on the licenses and registrations you hold and the states where you practice.

Plan

Treatment plans vary according to the diagnosis, and as is true in veterinary medicine, some are more complicated than others. On the low end of the severity scale is preventive treatment. On the higher end is surgical intervention

Treatment plans after DEA noncompliance diagnoses follow the same methodology. A veterinary practice that hasn't experienced any serious issues but has not properly audited its controlled substances inventory might treat the problem by conducting more frequent reconciliations to ensure the counts (actual inventory) balance out and match the logbooks (expected inventory).

On the other hand, if a practice identifies theft or a significant loss of controlled substances, a surgical strike might be necessary to investigate and correct the issue.

Regardless of whether a patient is healthy or sick, wellness checks are opportunities to evaluate a patient's overall health, assess risks and keep the patient on track through treatment plans.

SOAP alone does not prevent infection. You must use it to ensure compliance with DEA regulations. Start with a thorough cleansing to scrub off any issues and ensure non-exposure. Then wash regularly to maintain cleanliness and stay protected.

Happy sanitizing! TVB

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Controlled Substances Act
bit.ly/45M6M4t

Title 21 of the Code of Federal Regulations
bit.ly/4oyIdPP

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TALK THE TALK

Getting A+ Service From Gen Z Employees

Some team members who came of age in the smartphone era might need help with developing their soft skills.

BY AMANDA L. DONNELLY, DVM, MBA

According to the U.S. Labor Department, members of Generation Z will make up 30% of the workforce by 2030. While most veterinary practices employ Gen Z team members (ages 28 or younger), a Resume Templates survey showed that 91% of managers were concerned about hiring Gen Z employees for customer service roles, and 62% had received customer complaints about that age group. I've heard similar stories from some veterinary leaders, who say their younger team members sometimes lack soft skills and a genuine desire to serve pet owners.

Given that Gen Z new hires have limited job experience and might lack exceptional interpersonal skills, let's look at how to create an orientation and onboarding program that sets them up for success.

Establish Clear Expectations

Don't assume new hires know what you expect from them exactly and how they're supposed to deliver excellent client service. During orientation, tell them what success looks like in their job role. The following expectations might need clarity:

- Maintain attention to detail.
- Be punctual and professional.
- Always use a positive tone of voice.
- Take the initiative to respond to clients quickly.
- Use specific communication skills to connect with pet owners.
- Ask for co-worker feedback and respond positively to constructive remarks.

After giving a performance review, a practice leader can ask, "What questions do you have about meeting those job expectations?"

Gen Z team members might not understand what exemplary client service means at your clinic. Help them appreciate that pet owners value convenience and a relationship with trusted, caring advisers. Encourage them to visualize what an exceptional client experience looks like and how you will train them to deliver that level of care.

Focus on Purpose

Deloitte's *2025 Gen Z and Millennial Survey* revealed that 89% of Gen Zers said purpose-driven work influences their motivation and is essential to their job satisfaction. Just over half (54%) said meaningful work is very important when they evaluate potential employers.

Gen Z also wants a sense of belonging and to engage in conversation, so avoid "talking at" them.

Here's more advice:

- Ask about their values and goals to help you understand their perspectives and motivators.
- Talk about your practice's mission and core values and how a team member's role in building client loyalty and compliance helps pets get needed care.
- During training, focus on the "why" of specific job duties, not just the "how."
- Explain that using specific client communication isn't just a task to complete but also a way to build connections and trust with pet owners, helping to enhance the human-animal bond.

Set Service Standards

One of the best ways to ensure consistent and exemplary client service is to set clear standards. They should cover the basics, like making eye contact, smiling when greeting a pet owner and using a personalized closing, such as "It was a pleasure seeing you and Bella today," rather than a generic "Have a good one."

You can also set standards that help Gen Zers build strong connections with clients. Here are examples of what a receptionist might do during every client interaction:

- Respond to inquiries or requests with a positive phrase, like "I'd be happy to help you" or "Let me see what I can do."



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- Offer at least one engaging comment, such as a compliment or reassuring statement
- Express gratitude. One example is, "Thank you for bringing Chloe in. We're so happy we get to partner with you to provide her great care."

Teach Interpersonal Skills

Gen Zers grew up with the internet, smartphones and social media. Being digital natives and maturing during the COVID-19 pandemic might have affected the development of their soft skills. (One Gen Z employee told me she didn't know how to engage in small talk with clients.)

Since some younger team members might have awkward social skills, help them learn to connect more easily with clients. Discuss how active listening and nonverbal communication, such as smiling, eye contact and nodding one's head, show interest when clients are talking. Brainstorm with them on questions they can use to initiate conversations. Examples include:

- "What are you and Jake going to do this weekend?"
- "Why did you name her Moxie?"
- "How long has it been since you've had a kitten?"



DR. AMANDA L. DONNELLY

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Match Training With Learning Styles

If your practice's employee training relies on passive instruction and job shadowing, think about redesigning your onboarding program. Here are three ways to align with Gen Z learning styles.

- **Change methods:** Younger team members who grew up with YouTube, Instagram and TikTok might prefer video and audio instruction over reading articles or training manuals. In addition to sharing online videos with new hires, you can record your own on topics such as how to greet clients and how to schedule appointments. You can also use charts, graphs and other visuals to augment the training. For example, create a flow chart showing the steps for delivering outstanding phone service, and produce brochures or infographics on communicating the benefits of preventive care services to pet owners.
- **Keep it short:** Schedule training sessions lasting no more than 15 to 30 minutes on one topic. Likewise, implement microlearning, which means three to seven minutes of content focused on a single learning objective, such as teaching a receptionist to avoid defensiveness when responding to an angry client.
- **Make it interactive:** Studies show that Gen Zers prefer collaborative learning that involves feedback. One way to do it is with interactive role-playing exercises to teach skills such as nonverbal communication and how to ask open-ended questions and deliver empathy statements. Have team members act as the client so that they better understand the pet owner's perspective.

Short, interactive training sessions and frequent quizzes are ideal ways to keep Gen Zers engaged in the learning process and enhance knowledge retention.

Investing time in implementing an excellent client service training program can empower Gen Z employees to build client loyalty and compliance, helping more pets get the care they deserve. TVB

BONUS TIPS

- Solicit feedback from Generation Z team members to learn how they would improve your training program.
- Promote learning and growth development in your trained Gen Z team members by asking them to help onboard new hires.

TAKE CHARGE

Making Patient Care Sustainably Affordable

Practices can do more to fulfill client, team and business needs.

BY HEATHER PRENDERGAST, RVT, CVPM, SPHR

One topic kept surfacing when I attended recent conferences: the affordability of veterinary care. Not surprisingly, the discussions generated passionate perspectives from all corners of the industry. Clearly, affordability is shaped by economic pressures, practice dynamics and client expectations. It's also an opportunity for us to reflect and evolve as we strive to make veterinary medicine more accessible, sustainable and trustworthy.

Let's start by describing affordability of care and access to care.

Affordability of Care

- **Costs:** Do my veterinary practice's fees exceed what most clients in my community can stomach?
- **Financing:** Do we offer in-clinic or third-party payment plans?
- **Options:** Are my services tiered to allow for diverse client budgets?
- **Perception of value:** Do clients think my services are worth the price?

Access to Care

- **Location:** Are veterinary practices nearby, especially in rural and underserved areas?
- **Appointments:** Can clients schedule one within a reasonable time frame?
- **Language and culture:** Do communication or trust issues hinder clients from seeking care?



- **Transportation and mobility:** Can clients physically get to my practice?

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, access to care was a primary concern. Clients had trouble getting through the door because of staff shortages, jam-packed schedules and curbside protocols. Today, the focus among clients has shifted from "Can I get there?" to "Can I afford it?"

What We See in Practice

As affordability becomes a growing concern, veterinary teams notice real-time shifts in client behavior and business operations, including:

- A dip in patient volume, even while revenue remains steady.
- More open appointment slots, even in previously overbooked hospitals.
- Cautious business decisions, such as smaller staff pay raises or fewer services, due to economic uncertainty.

A combination of trends, perceptions and internal processes has led to:

- Rapid fee increases to keep up with inflation and the cost of operations.
- The stabilization of client demand as post-COVID growth returns to typical, single-digit annual rates.
- Inconsistent client experiences because of service gaps, delays or communication breakdowns.
- Hesitancy to squeeze in urgent cases when appointment slots are full.
- Presenting only one treatment plan, then turning away or referring clients who decline it.
- Not authorizing outside pharmacy requests or offering limited ways to schedule appointments.

A Few Solutions

Affordability challenges don't have a one-size-fits-all answer. The proper approach is thoughtful collaboration and a willingness to reexamine prices, operations, services and leadership.

At a certain point, continued price increases become unsustainable, not just for clients but also for our profession's long-term health. Many of us believe we have reached that point. Therefore, we must focus on operational efficiency and team utilization to support revenue growth and access.

When prices reach the proverbial ceiling, scheduling more appointments without having to sacrifice service quality or the team's well-being

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becomes the key lever. That means creating seamless workflows and leveraging team members to the top of their licenses. The more effectively the team works, the lower the cost to deliver care and the greater the access to care.

Embrace Technology

Technology isn't a luxury in veterinary practice; it's a necessity. Tools like artificial-intelligence-driven scribes and modern practice management software systems can significantly increase efficiency and accuracy, allowing doctors and technicians to focus on patient care and client connection. When medical records are complete and easily referenced, follow-up care improves. When the team has tools that work alongside them, appointment capacity increases without burdening people behind the scenes.

Practice managers should audit their technology regularly by asking:

- Are we using everything that's built into our system?
- Could third-party tools solve the bottlenecks?

Rebuild Client Trust

Trust in veterinary medicine has taken a hit. Now is the time to restore it, one client interaction at a time.

The client experience that practices deliver must be intentional, not just reactive, so prioritize service training to include de-escalation strategies, empathy communication and proactive problem-solving. Veterinary teams should identify and address the most common client pain points and take swift corrective action.

I suggest asking clients, "What small changes would improve your experience in our practice?" You might be surprised by what you hear. If you don't ask, don't worry, because pet owners are saying it online.

Let's be a profession that listens and evolves.

LEARN MORE

Do you need help triggering changes in your veterinary practice? Check out Dr. Brian Hamm's article "Understanding Supply, Demand and Pricing in a Post–Pandemic Veterinary Economy" at bit.ly/40UC7zd.



HEATHER PRENDERGAST
The Take Charge columnist is the CEO of Synergie Consulting and the author of *Practice Management for the Veterinary Team, 4th Edition.*

Offer a True Spectrum of Care

Veterinary care should not be an all-or-nothing proposition. When practices only offer the gold standard and nothing else, they shut the door on clients who want to do something, even if they can't do everything.

Providing a spectrum of care doesn't mean lowering your standards; it means meeting clients where they are and offering thoughtful, well-documented options. A spectrum of care protects the patient, supports the client and preserves the human-animal bond.

Specialists are essential to our profession, but many of them are overwhelmed. General practices are fully capable of managing many diagnostics and procedures in-house, especially when those hospitals invest in continuing education and offer mentorship.

Not every X-ray requires a board-certified radiologist's review. Not every cystotomy requires a referral. By building internal confidence and capacity, we can reduce client costs, improve access to care and ensure that referral centers are available to patients who urgently require them.

Today's consumers value ease, speed and flexibility. If your clients are choosing online pharmacies or alternative care providers, it's not necessarily all about the price; it's often about convenience.

Rather than fighting market trends, learn from them. Review your policies. Are you inadvertently erecting barriers to loyal clients? Remove the friction, improve their experience and meet them where they are.

Lead Change from the Top

Leadership! Leadership! Culture! Culture!

A practice's success starts with leadership. Leaders who model empathy, service, innovation and integrity create a teamwide ripple effect. When leaders embrace technology, empower their staff and demonstrate a commitment to continuous improvement, they unlock everyone's potential.

Conversely, when leadership is inconsistent or disengaged, the culture suffers. Team members lose motivation, resist change and disengage from the client experience. They won't offer to squeeze in another patient. They won't step into the gray zone of the spectrum of care. And they certainly won't feel emotional ownership of your practice's mission.

Leaders who want their teams to lean in, adapt and grow must do the same.

Affordability of care is not just a pricing issue; it's also a leadership issue, efficiency issue, trust issue and cultural issue. The solution isn't to work harder, charge more or give up. The answer is to lead with vision, evolve with intention and recommit to the purpose that brought us into this profession in the first place. TVB

TALENT TERRITORY

Recruitment's Impact on Your Bottom Line

Practices thrive when they invest in attracting and retaining high-performing veterinarians.

BY STACY PURSELL, CPC, CERS

In this highly competitive hiring landscape, finding the right veterinarian is about more than just filling a vacancy; it's also a strategic investment that can directly impact a practice's profitability, client satisfaction and long-term success. The return on investment of hiring a well-matched veterinarian is significant, influencing everything from patient outcomes to employee retention to operational efficiency.

Increased Revenue

One of the most immediate and tangible benefits of hiring a good veterinarian is more revenue. A competent clinician delivers superior medical care, leading to improved patient outcomes, increased client trust and repeat visits. Clients whose pets receive top-tier care are more likely to return and are more willing to accept recommended treatments and procedures.

A veterinarian with strong diagnostic and surgical skills can help expand the services offered. For example, hiring a doctor with expertise in orthopedic surgery enables clinics to attract a broader client base and keep revenue in-house rather than having to refer those patients to specialists. In addition, a veterinarian with strong communication skills can increase compliance with preventive care, boosting the practice's earnings.

Enhanced Client Satisfaction

Veterinary practices rely heavily on client relationships and loyalty. A veterinarian who communicates effectively, builds rapport with pet owners and provides compassionate care contributes significantly to client retention rates. Satisfied clients are more likely to follow treatment plans, refer friends and family, and leave positive online reviews, driving new business.



Poor hiring choices, on the other hand, can lead to employee turnover, inconsistent service and dissatisfied clients. If a veterinarian lacks strong interpersonal skills or is unable to explain treatment options clearly, pet owners might seek medical care elsewhere, resulting in lost revenue and potential reputational damage. Practices that invest in veterinarians with strong interpersonal skills enhance client satisfaction and loyalty.

Operational Efficiency

Well-qualified veterinarians enhance a practice's efficiency by managing time effectively and working collaboratively with technicians and support staff. This streamlining of operations reduces bottlenecks, minimizes patient wait times and improves the clinic workflow.

In contrast, hiring the wrong veterinarian can lead to inefficiencies and misdiagnoses, as well as increased stress on demoralized team members. Over time, this situation can contribute to higher turnover and increased recruitment and training costs.

Practice Growth

Hiring a veterinarian with specialized skills can create new revenue streams and growth opportunities for a practice. For instance, clinicians with expertise in dentistry, physical therapy or alternative medicine can attract a niche clientele and help differentiate the practice from competitors.

More service offerings increase potential revenue and enhance a clinic's community reputation. Practices that continuously evolve are more likely to thrive in an increasingly competitive landscape. In addition, clients are more likely to seek comprehensive care from a single trusted clinic rather than visit multiple practices for specialized services.

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Compliance and Spending

Client compliance is a key driver of veterinary revenue. The right veterinarian knows how to educate pet owners, communicate the value of preventive care and encourage adherence to treatment plans. Greater client compliance with vaccinations, dental cleanings and wellness programs increases revenue during nearly every visit.

A veterinarian with poor communication skills might struggle to gain client trust, resulting in less compliance and missed revenue. Veterinarians who effectively convey the importance of medical care maximize the financial value of each client interaction.

Reputation Management and Online Presence

Online reviews and social media play a crucial role in attracting new clients. A veterinarian who provides exceptional service and builds strong pet owner relationships is likely to receive positive reviews and word-of-mouth referrals. That outcome enhances the clinic's reputation and boosts its online visibility.

Negative experiences, however, can quickly translate into poor reviews, damaging a practice's reputation and deterring potential clients. Practices that prioritize hiring veterinarians with strong client-facing skills can proactively manage their online presence and maintain a stellar reputation.

Long-Term Sustainability

The cumulative impact of hiring the right veterinarian translates into long-term financial stability for a practice. A skilled and well-integrated veterinarian contributes to revenue growth, client retention, operational efficiency and staff satisfaction, all of which bolster the practice's financial health.

Investing in a robust recruitment process, including thorough interviews, skills assessments and reference checks, requires time and resources. However, the long-term benefits far outweigh the initial investment. Hiring strategically ensures a steady increase in revenue and the ability to reinvest in technology and staff development.

By understanding the true return on investment of hiring the right veterinarian, veterinary practices can make informed hiring decisions that drive long-term success.

The key to a practice's financial health lies not just in hiring, but also in nurturing a work environment where veterinarians can thrive and deliver outstanding care. And that is why veterinary employers must make strategic hiring a top priority now and into the future. TVB



STACY PURSELL
The Talent Territory columnist is the founder and CEO of The Vet Recruiter. She is a workplace and workforce expert who has served the animal health industry and veterinary profession for more than 25 years.

SAVING MONEY

According to Veterinary Business Matters, hiring a new veterinarian can cost as much as 50% to 75% of their annual salary when you factor in hiring fees, lost productivity and training expenses. By investing in a thorough hiring process and selecting a veterinarian who is a strong cultural fit, practices can reduce employee turnover rates. Veterinarians who align with a practice's values and long-term goals are more likely to remain engaged, satisfied and committed to their role, leading to long-term financial savings.



HR HUDDLE

When Are Employee Name Changes Valid?

BY KELLIE G. OLAH, SPHR, CVPM, SHRM-SCP



Q: I need guidance on a situation I want to handle thoughtfully and accurately. A client service representative with us for over three years now wants to use an alias, rather than her first name, when answering the phone. Her request appears to be more about privacy than related to a safety concern, gender identity or a legal issue. We use first names and initials in internal documentation and on name badges, so I don't know if she plans to request broader changes. What should I do from a policy and employee relations standpoint?

A: First, I recommend having a brief and respectful follow-up conversation with the employee to explore whether an underlying reason is behind her request. Sometimes, employees won't immediately disclose sensitive circumstances, such as harassment, domestic violence or online safety, especially if they aren't sure whether management will support them. Since your CSR's request came suddenly, gently explore it nonconfrontationally. Try asking, "Would you be open to sharing a bit more about what's prompting this preference? It would help me make sure we handle it appropriately and supportively."

If you learn that her request is simply a matter of personal privacy (with no safety or legal basis), I recommend honoring it with a few essential guardrails.

There's generally no legal issue in allowing an employee to use another first name in a public-facing context, like answering phones, especially when the alias is consistent, isn't intended to deceive, and doesn't confuse clients or team members. Many workplaces are sensitive to identity and privacy preferences, so making allowances can demonstrate your flexibility and respect for individual boundaries, provided the alias doesn't interfere with operations or accountability.

That said, set clear boundaries. The alias should be limited to verbal phone introductions or potentially other informal client interactions, like greeting walk-in clients. The name must not change from day to day and should not duplicate another staff member's.

I would draw a firm line by using the employee's legal name in internal documentation, medical records, and any systems that function as part of your legal, clinical or employment record. In addition, client records, timekeeping systems, patient notes, invoices and HR documentation should not be altered to reflect an alias. Those documents could be subject to audit, subpoena or other scrutiny at some point, so they must reflect accurate and legal identifiers.

Once you and the employee are in agreement, document the situation and resolution in an email or memo. It should include the name that must be used in phone greetings, clarify when the alias is permitted and note that all internal records will continue to reflect the CSR's legal name.

Q: A veterinary technician working at our hospital for just over a year received a formal strike related to her inability to remain composed and effective under pressure. At the end of the conversation, she disclosed that she was pregnant. Since then, she has had multiple unscheduled absences, typically because she said she wasn't feeling well. Some of the callouts were accompanied by a doctor's note when we requested one, but the majority were not formally documented. While we desire to be respectful and supportive, the frequency of her absences

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is beginning to impact the team. According to our employee handbook, unplanned absences are tracked over a rolling 12-month period. The progressive disciplinary steps are a possible verbal warning for one to three unplanned absences, a written warning for four to eight of them, and potential termination upon the ninth occurrence. Chronic or excessive absenteeism, even outside those thresholds, may warrant disciplinary action. The technician has not requested a specific accommodation nor indicated that her absences were directly related to a medical issue or pregnancy complication. How can we ensure compliance with pregnancy protections while maintaining consistency with our attendance policy?

A: While your handbook outlines a clear policy on unplanned absences and progressive discipline, it is secondary when an employee's medical condition, such as pregnancy-related complications, might qualify for protection under federal law.

Before you take further action, determine whether your technician's absences are pregnancy-related. If they are, and if the condition affects her ability to work, the Americans with Disabilities Act might require you to consider a reasonable accommodation, which could include intermittent leave, flexible scheduling or temporary duty adjustments. In such cases, don't apply your attendance policy strictly. Also, determine how best to support her while maintaining your business's needs.

To achieve clarity, speak with her to understand the reasons for her recent absences and whether she anticipates needing accommodations. Such a compliant and compassionate response keeps your expectations clear.

Here's what you can say during the conversation:

"Hi, [Name]. Thanks for taking a few minutes to meet today. I wanted to check in with you regarding your recent attendance. We've noticed a pattern of absences over the past couple of months and wanted to review them with you. We documented a few of those callouts, and I appreciate that you provided a doctor's note for the most recent ones. (Some states don't permit asking for a doctor's note unless specific criteria are met.) In the meantime, I want to ask if there's anything we should be aware of medically or otherwise that might be contributing to your time away. Is there any context you'd like to share?"

If your technician says her absences were pregnancy-related, you can respond: "Thank you for sharing that. We want to make sure we're supporting you appropriately. If you anticipate needing further time off or modifications to your schedule or duties, we're happy to talk through what's reasonable. In some cases, we may ask for documentation from your medical provider to help guide those decisions. The goal here is to make sure you feel supported while we continue to manage team coverage and practice operations."

At that point, you can provide her with a reasonable-accommodation request form.

If the absences were not pregnancy-related, you might say: "Thank you for clarifying. I just wanted to make sure we asked the question before moving forward. As a reminder, our attendance policy outlines that multiple unplanned absences over a rolling 12-month period may result in progressive discipline. Based on the current pattern, you're approaching the point where a written warning would typically be issued. If future absences continue, we might need to initiate the next step in the policy."

After the meeting, be sure to document the conversation neutrally and factually. If the absences were tied to a pregnancy and your employee asked for an accommodation or seems to need one, the documentation becomes part of your legal compliance.

Continue to monitor your technician's attendance and consider setting up weekly or biweekly check-ins to maintain an open line of communication. This action signals your support, allows her to raise concerns, and helps you manage the situation with consistency. TVB



KELLIE G. OLAH
The HR Huddle columnist is the practice management and human resources consultant at Veterinary Business Advisors. The company provides legal, human resources and practice management services to veterinarians nationwide. Email questions to speaking@veterinarybusinessadvisors.com.

LEGALLY SPEAKING

According to *U.S. News & World Report*, "Changing your name for reasons other than marriage, divorce or adoption will typically involve a more complicated legal process. A common process is to file paperwork with a family court or probate court, including an explanation of the reason for the requested change. This generally requires filling out a name change form, filing the form with the court, paying a fee (usually less than $500) and providing associated documentation with the court."

INSIDE:

72
20 QUESTIONS
From One Mission in Life to Another

76
FEARLESS
Is the Fear of Success Holding You Back?

"In veterinary practice, impostor syndrome often occurs alongside low self-esteem, insecurity, depression and anxiety."

80
FINANCIAL WELLNESS
Updating Your Clinic's Retirement Plan

82
SOCIALLY ACCEPTABLE
Getting Personal on Social Media



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OFF THE RECORD

Why General Practice Is the Real Residency

You can do just about anything a specialist does if you put in the reps.

BY STACEE SANTI, DVM

When I was a senior in veterinary school, my 3-year-old mostly indoor cat stopped eating, became very lethargic and developed a pretty good fever. I took him to the hospital where I was doing my senior rotations. The resident examined Hal (short for "hop-a-long," as he had only three legs) and determined that we needed to do some tests, starting with complete lab work, including FeLV/FIV, and full-body X-rays, all of which returned normal. Next up was an abdominal ultrasound to look for the ever-sneaky feline pancreatitis. Sure enough, his pancreas looked "a little suspicious." Hal was admitted to critical care and was started on fluids and antibiotics. When he didn't improve within 24 hours, the veterinary team added heparin because, apparently, DIC (disseminated intravascular coagulation) was imminent.

At the time, my only income came from waiting tables at Olive Garden on weekend nights, and I remember feeling embarrassed having to tell Hal's clinician that I couldn't afford more. I decided to take Hal home and do my best.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Dr. Stacee Santi, *Today's Veterinary Business*'s newest columnist, aims to share everything from career tips to life advice and to remind readers that the best lessons in veterinary medicine live off the record.



NAVC.com/Embrace

The next day, while dragging Hal out from under the bed to give his heparin shot, I felt a large lump about the size of a lemon on his lower back. It burst. And just like that, I knew that Hal didn't have cryptic pancreatitis or imminent DIC. He had a good old-fashioned cat bite abscess, the most common fever-causing condition in cats, something that neither the resident nor ER clinician had seen.

Once I graduated and got into general practice, the story became a crowd-pleaser with my colleagues. They would shake their heads and say, "You gotta love the ol' ivory tower."

Where Idealism Lives

During my veterinary training, most of the teachers were specialists. Few had been on the frontlines for a lengthy time, which is why my cat's abscess got missed. Additionally, the cases that wind up in university teaching hospitals are filtered, financially and medically, by general practitioners. This approach creates a warped view of veterinary practice, where you think your day-to-day will be scouting for zebras, like atypical Addisons and sneaky liver shunts. In the real world, however, you find yourself knee-deep in otitis, arthritis, dental disease and abscesses. These conditions don't make it to the ivory tower. They get handled at the GP level, quietly and competently, every single day.

Most of the new grads I've worked with (or students on externships) fall into the same trap I did in the real world. You take what you learned in veterinary school and try to apply it in the trenches, only to realize it doesn't quite work as well. You aren't taught to think like a general practitioner.

Here is one of the best lessons my GP mentor taught me. I now pass it down to every young veterinarian.

A 9-year-old golden retriever walks in with pale gums, a distended belly and collapse onset since yesterday — classic hemoabdomen symptoms. The standard first-wave workup you learn in school is CBC/chem, X-rays and ultrasound, with a price tag circling the $1,000 mark. Technically, this is the "correct" approach. But in real life, the IRL approach is to grab a syringe and stick the belly. When it comes back full of blood, you have a meaningful conversation with the pet owner about spending the first $1,000 to get started and the next few thousand to try to save the dog's life. Real-life medicine doesn't always look like what you were taught in veterinary school.

You do it scared, ask for help when needed, and then one day, it's second nature.

5 Steps to Proficiency

You don't need a residency to reach a specialist level. With enough cases, curiosity and repetition, you can become an expert in general practice. Here's the five-step roadmap:

1 Pick a Focus and Master It

For me, it was ultrasound. I became so obsessed with ultrasound that I pitched my boss to invest in a machine for the veterinary practice. I took extra courses in both abdominal and echocardiogram procedures.

The vet school professors had told us, "Look at enough normal ultrasounds and the abnormal will jump out at you." So, that's what I did. I scanned every sedated patient I could — spays, lacerations, anything. The techs were annoyed, but I was putting in the reps. After you scan a couple of hundred normal animals, hypertrophic cardiomyopathy in a cat or a liver mass in a dog stands out like a bladder stone on X-rays.

2 Remember That Everyone Has a First Time, Even the Specialist

I'll never forget my first canine extraction. The patient was a 2-year-old pit bull named Rocky, who had a midcrown fracture on a very large canine. I did what I was taught in school: Refer him to the veterinary dentist across town.

The owner, whose name was Tina Turner (I will never forget this part!), was fired up. She asked me, "Who do you think I am that I can afford $1,500 to fix my dog's tooth?" Then she stared me down and asked what her other options were. I told her we could extract the tooth.

She narrowed her eyes. "How many times have you done this?"

DEEP DIVES

Learn about hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, emergency colectomies and peritonitis — and much more — at vetfolio.com. Much of the educational content is RACE-approved.

For a second, I thought about lying. Instead, I said, "Once. On a cadaver head in vet school."

Tina Turner paused, gave me the world's longest side-eye and said: "All right. You can do it. But if you get in over your head, promise me you'll ask for help."

It was rough work. That first extraction in Portland, Oregon, took me over an hour. But after enough reps with other patients, I got it down to less than five minutes. That's what happens. You do it scared, ask for help when needed, and then one day, it's second nature.

3 Put Yourself in the Proper Environment

If you want to get your hands dirty and your feet wet, find a job a few hours away from the nearest ER or specialty clinic. I had the good fortune to work in Durango, Colorado, where the closest referral center was four hours away. (In the wintertime, it might as well have been on Mars.)

That kind of setup forces you to stretch. You either figure it out or the patient suffers. There's no safety net, which means you rise to the occasion and do your best.

That situation opens the door to doing cool things you might not get to try otherwise, like launching a chemotherapeutic service. Once companies like Oncocur came onto the scene, we figured out how to administer high-end IV chemo in our small-town clinic. Lymphoma, transitional cell carcinoma, osteosarcoma — we treated everything. It was a win for the patients and another serious skill under my belt.

4 Say Yes to High-Volume, Low-Income Practice

My first job out of the gate was at SE Portland Animal Hospital, which was known for two things: tons of cases and clients with no money. And honestly, I couldn't have been happier.

It was real-life practice, full throttle. When you're seeing that much volume, you gain experience at warp speed and end up handling cases you'd barely believe. I'm talking emergency colectomies, open-abdomen peritonitis, chest tubes for cat bite pyothorax, and yes, even a cat whose head is stuck in a mayonnaise jar.

Picture a high-paced episode of the old TV series "ER." It was like that, only the animal version, every single day for six years. It was like a fast-track residency in medicine, surgery and people.

5 Surround Yourself With People Who Are Doing What You Want To Do

If you take the time to find the people who love to teach, you can become a Jedi. Teachers are everywhere. They are your colleagues with a few more years under their belt, your boss and especially your technician.

One of the people who taught me the most over my career wasn't a veterinarian. Mr. Thanh Tran was a veterinary technician, and anyone who worked at SE Portland Animal Hospital in the '90s or 2000s is probably nodding their head now.

Thanh came to the United States as a teenage refugee from Vietnam. He started out cleaning kennels, and then assisting doctors. Eventually, he became the head surgery tech and was assigned to train every new grad who walked through the door. He taught me and loads of other new grads to spay and neuter like a machine. How to pin fractures. How to apply bone plates. But most of all, he taught me to believe in myself.

Whenever I'd hesitate, Thanh would look at me and say in his unforgettable dialect, "Why you can't do this? You tell me now."

Why can't you do it? Are you not smart enough? Not willing to learn? Not willing to work hard? Once you realize the answer is, "Of course, I can," you're officially on your way to one of the most gratifying, chaotic, fulfilling, weirdly wonderful careers out there.

And someday you'll be the one telling a newbie, "Why you can't do this? You tell me now." TVB

DID YOU KNOW?

The U.K.–based International School of Veterinary Postgraduate Studies offers a general practitioner certificate (GPCert). Learn more at isvps.org.



DR. STACEE SANTI
The Off the Record columnist is the founder of a client engagement tech company, the author of *Stop Acting Like a Girl* and the host of the *Everyday Wonder Women podcast*.

20 QUESTIONS

From One Mission to Another

After a paralyzing accident, former Idexx CEO Jon Ayers is laser-focused on cats of all kinds — domestic and wild.

BY DEBORAH A. STONE, MBA, PH.D., CVPM

Jon Ayers' LinkedIn profile shows just a few of his career stops: former chairman, president and CEO of Idexx Laboratories, CATalyst Council board member, and chair of Panthera. It goes on to say that, in human health, he supports a regional health center "through philanthropy and board membership, and the spinal cord injury community through 'venture philanthropy.'" A spinal cord injury suffered in 2019 is what ended his leadership of one of the veterinary industry's largest and most successful companies, Idexx.

1. You have accomplished many things in the animal health space and served as a key leader in the veterinary profession. What are you doing these days?

It's still my purpose to help animals, so I'm supporting wild cat conservation through Panthera. More recently, I've added domestic cats by working with the CATalyst Council to support the health and well-being of domestic cats, particularly in the U.S. Now, I have 41 species of the feline family that I'm supporting. It's all through volunteer work, philanthropy and my opportunity to give back. Cats are super important to the balance of the ecosystem, and by working on wild cat conservation, we're working on natural ecosystem conservation.

2. You chose the veterinary business route over veterinary medicine. Did you ever consider becoming a veterinarian?

I earned an undergraduate degree that would have been good for medical school — molecular biophysics and biochemistry — but I didn't have any concept of going to veterinary school. Along the way, I got more interested in business, and so after college, I went into business. I didn't use that degree until I joined Idexx in 2002, and then, all of a sudden, it made sense why I majored in it.

3. What jobs did you have before you went to work at Idexx?

I did a whole bunch of very different things. My first job was working for IBM in computer sales. Then I got an MBA and went into business strategy, consulting with a firm called Bannon & Company. I then went to Wall Street to work for Morgan Stanley in mergers and acquisitions and corporate finance. After that, I went to work for a very large industrial company, United Technologies, and eventually ended up running Carrier Corp. That was the thing I did right before Idexx.

4. Those were very different experiences. Did you have a career end goal in mind?

I liked doing different things, but I was working toward a career in general management. That's what I love the most: running companies, growing companies, making companies and the people in them successful, and making customers happy with innovation.

5. What was your secret sauce in growing Idexx into the veterinary giant it is today?

That's a big question. When I got there, I thought Idexx had a great opportunity to grow the businesses it was in, which are the businesses they're still in today: diagnostics and software to support the veterinary practice. The company had a long history of innovation, so I took it upon myself to learn from and, in some cases, lead the innovation to bring capabilities to veterinary practices that they didn't have before. I also have a background in marketing and sales from IBM, and I used those skills to figure out how to bring that innovation to the market. The combination of innovation and how to bring it to the market in a way that veterinarians say, "Yeah, this makes sense and I want to adopt it," has to go together. You must have both to make it. I also focused on the employees and the employee experience. Employee engagement is directly correlated to business success. I spent a lot of time ensuring that it was a great employee experience because I knew it would lead to a good customer experience and growth.



Jon Ayers with one of his favorite artworks, a photo showing a mother manul (Pallas's cat) and her kitten in the wild.

Photo courtesy of Jon Ayers

6. Did you have mentors along the way?

I don't think I had many, as I was just internally motivated first to learn and then to achieve. The things that became interesting to me intellectually were my passion. I read a lot of books about leadership and probably learned a lot, but much of it was just through experience. A lot of people ask me, "How did you get into wild cats? Did you have a mentor getting into wild cats?" The answer is no. I've always liked cats while growing up. I've liked cats before Idexx, during Idexx and after Idexx. One day in 2016 or 2017, I asked myself, "So, I love cats, I love nature. I wonder what kind of cats are in nature." I started doing independent research, which led me to learn about all the cats in nature. I had no idea there were all these different kinds of cats. While they're all cats, they are completely adapted to their environment and similar in some ways and quite different in other ways. And that led me to Panthera, as all they do is focus on wild cats.

7. Do you currently have any special animals? Any cats?

No, I don't have cats. They don't really work with my condition because I can't feel, I can't pat, and I can't hold a cat. Part of bonding with a cat is very much the physical bonding, and I can't do any of that. So, I just enjoy them vicariously at this point.

HOW TO HELP

Panthera is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to ensuring a future for wild cats and the vast landscapes on which they depend. Donations are accepted at panthera.org/donate.

8. What does a day in your life look like?

With my spinal cord injury, I can't move 75% of my body voluntarily. I also can't feel that 75%. I spend about 20 hours a week in different kinds of physical therapy with physical therapists and caregivers. A lot of it is moving and maintaining what muscles I do have, either by using them or by having them stimulated electronically, which keeps them strong even though I can't move them. Because I'm in all this physical therapy, I have time to think, and so I'm thinking about my projects.

9. What's your thinking process regarding projects?

By the time I get to doing something, I've already thought it through. I also have a to-do list, but I keep most of it in my head. I can write an entire paper in my head while I'm thinking because I'm flat on my back, getting physical therapy, and when I get time to write it, I've got most of it down. That's one of the things that gives me purpose. It gives me something to do while I'm going through all the challenging physical therapy and other aspects of everyday living with this condition.

10. How do you preserve those middle-of-the-night ideas?

Sometimes it seems like a great idea in the middle of the night, and the next morning it's like, "OK, it wasn't that great." A lot of times in the morning, I'll write down all the things I was thinking about, just to make sure I save them. When I say, "Write down," I mean write it on an iPad with word-processing software. I can't use my fingers; that's a problem, but I can use my pinky to touch the iPad, and I've got excellent mobility in my arm to do that. I also use Siri dictation. Between the two, it takes me a little longer to do things, but I've sort of gotten used to it.

11. What keeps you moving forward?

My mental therapy is focusing on things. With my condition, I can't do physical things, and I can't travel. But I can use my mind, and with the benefit of technology and video calls, I can talk to a lot of people. I can also write and research, and I do it for a purpose. That's really what keeps me going through the challenges of the condition of spinal cord injury. By having things that interest me and always wanting to take the next step, do a little more research, connect with another person, write another paper or an analysis, or share something with someone, I enjoy discovery, insight and learning.

12. Is there anything you wish you had done differently in life?

Perhaps get more out of college. I wasn't mature enough to take advantage of a lot of resources early on, but ultimately, I took advantage of all what were available. And then, maybe I wish I hadn't gone out riding my bicycle that morning in 2019, but what are you going to do? It was a beautiful June morning in Maine. The sun had risen at 4:59 a.m. It just doesn't get any better than that, and it's what I'd done for years. My crash did not involve a car; it involved another cyclist, and we rode in a very safe area. I have friends who have been riding their entire life, and maybe they'd fall and break an arm or something, but it heals. So, why did it happen to me? You just have to get over it and can't have regrets. If you have regrets that affect you, they get in the way of adapting. So, I don't focus on regrets.

IN HIS WORDS

Jon Ayers wrote about Panthera and his interest in wild cats in a 2021 Viewpoints article. Read "After Meeting Adversity, I Answered Call of the Wild" at go.navc.com/Jon-Ayers.

I created a foundation called Ayers Wild Cat Conservation Trust two years before my injury because I knew I wanted to start a philanthropic focus, and I wanted something that was nature-oriented.

13. In addition to the physical changes, were the psychological challenges just as difficult?

Oh, yes. It was such an abrupt change because my condition happened as a result of a cycling crash. One minute I was fine, and the next minute I was paralyzed. People don't even really know what that means, as every spinal cord injury is different because of the level, the person and the nature of the injury. Everyone is a snowflake, as they call it. I had always thought, "What if I couldn't see, or what if I couldn't hear?" I never in my wildest imagination considered, "What if I can't feel?" Everyone's different, and they go through different phases, but they say it takes somewhere between four and seven years to fully make that transition. This week is the sixth anniversary of my injury, so I'm kind of there now. Fortunately, other than my injury, I'm actually in excellent health. I hope to live a long life, even though I'm challenged in a certain way.

14. How soon after your injury did you begin your work with wild cats?

I was injured in June 2019 and really took an interest in wild cats around 2016. I created a foundation called Ayers Wild Cat Conservation Trust two years before my injury because I knew I wanted to start a philanthropic focus, and I wanted something that was nature-oriented. Then I had my injury, and during the first 10 months, I had to focus on my health and the transition.

15. What were some of the changes in the early days of your transition?

You have to make a lot of them — a lot of technology, getting the right support and getting your house adapted. In less than a year, I said, "Well, my purpose had been to run my company. I can't do that now." I passed the baton and

needed a new purpose, something to keep me going. That's when I looked at the wild cats and said, "Why don't I accelerate that? Why don't I focus on that?" It led me to make meaningful contributions to Panthera, and they noticed and asked, "Would you like to join the board?" So, I joined the board, and within a week, they made me chair of the finance committee because nobody else on the board knew finance. Managing finance for a nonprofit is just as important as managing finance for a for-profit.

16. What happened next?

The founder asked me to be his successor, chair of the board. He knew I had a business background and an absolute genuine love of cats. Those were the two criteria for the position. And then, I didn't have anything to do. It was like I was growing in my capability to do things. He was still on the board but ready to pass the leadership to the next person, and then I came along. He's grateful for me, and I'm grateful for him having the idea and the confidence in me. I did remind him, "I have a spinal cord injury and can't travel." He goes, "I don't care. I think you can do it." And he was right.

17. After your injury, did you have difficulty asking for help and then accepting it?

Asking for help on the most basic things and being able to accept it was something I had to learn. I've been collaborative by nature forever, but collaboration is different than asking for help. I did my acute rehab at the Shepherd Center in Atlanta, where they teach you to advocate for yourself. People do not know your issues, so you have to speak up, particularly with people who don't deal with you every single day.

18. What else did you learn from your early rehab experience?

Asking for the basics is something I had to learn, not be embarrassed about, not be selfish about, not withhold, because people simply don't know. They don't know I can't open a door or drink by myself. Part of it is having a caregiver, but part of it is also just telling people, "This is what I need." What's interesting is that people are totally understanding.



DR. DEBORAH A. STONE
The 20 Questions columnist has served as a leader in the veterinary profession for more than 35 years as an author, presenter, adviser, mentor and educational course designer.

19. Besides wild cats and domestic cats, what are some of your other interests?

I'm a Grateful Dead fan. They did 2,500 concerts, and every single one of them was recorded, and every single one of them is different. I think Jerry Garcia and the Grateful Dead compare to Johann Sebastian Bach and Mozart, who I'm also a huge fan of. I probably listen to a Grateful Dead concert excerpt every day. There's enough material for the rest of my life. I love classical, jazz, and rock and roll, too.

20. What is your hope for the veterinary profession?

There's the companion animal side and the wild cat side, and I'll start with wild cats. My hope is that we stabilize the decline in populations of wild cats, whether they be tigers, lions, jaguars or the small cats. We can preserve an ecosystem, but if you don't preserve the apex predator, then it's an incomplete conservation. So, you really need to focus on conservation, and that would be my wish on that side. On the companion animal side, I hope that cats get the respect and understanding they deserve and that the veterinary profession advances. This is going to happen, and I just want it to happen faster. As the profession gets larger and more sophisticated, people are going to realize they need cat strategies that are different than dog strategies. It would make a difference if we could have more cat-friendly practices, cat medical training and innovation focused on cats. I'm big about bringing innovation to the veterinary profession in general, as I've been doing that for a couple of decades. Bringing innovation to the feline species is where the next big opportunity is. TVB

STORY ARCHIVE

Check out these previously published 20 Questions profiles:

- Former University of Florida Dean James W. Lloyd: go.navc.com/Lloyd
- Former AVMA president Lori Teller: go.navc.com/Teller
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FEARLESS

Is the Fear of Success Holding You Back?

Concerns about change, responsibility and belonging often arise in a profession requiring dedication, compassion and resilience.

BY NATALIE L. MARKS, DVM, CVJ, CCFP, ELITE FFCP-V

A mentor caught me off guard recently by asking, "Do you actually fear success?" The question came up during dinner as we discussed my businesses and projects. An outsider might have thought I was avoiding taking on a more decisive leadership role. However, the more I thought about my mentor's question, the more it bothered me. After all, who doesn't want to be successful?

At the time, the idea of being afraid of positive outcomes or success was new to me. But it's something psychologist Abraham Maslow noticed back in the mid-1900s. He called it the Jonah complex, named after the Biblical prophet Jonah, who desperately tried to avoid his divine calling.

In his book *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*, Maslow explained that even when we want to reach our full potential, we often hesitate to take the necessary steps. He pointed out that we fear our most immense possibilities. The thought of what we could become is thrilling, but at the same time, we're overwhelmed with feelings of weakness, awe and fear. Maslow believed that the fear of success stems from the fact that pursuing our dreams entails change, increased responsibility and heightened visibility — all of which can feel intimidating.



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As veterinary professionals, we are accustomed to managing fears of losing patients, making mistakes and not meeting client expectations. Unfortunately, another quiet fear is that taking on leadership roles or pursuing innovative ideas will attract criticism, lead to isolation or add unwelcome burdens.

When we recognize and face the fear of success, we take a step toward self-care and a healthier profession.

Understanding the Fear of Success

The fear of success might seem odd in a society that values achievement, but it stems from psychological factors such as:

- **Change and uncertainty:** Success often leads to changes in our roles, responsibilities and social settings. Even among high-achieving individuals, uncertainty causes discomfort because people prefer predictable routines.
- **More responsibility and scrutiny:** Greater expectations follow when we receive public recognition or are promoted within an organization. Success makes us more visible, which can feel threatening if we fear criticism or envy.
- **The loss of belonging or identity:** Some of us fear that excelling will set us apart from colleagues or family, leading to jealousy or rejection.
- **Perfectionism and a fear of failure:** The line between the fear of success and the fear of failure is thin. As I've written in previous articles, our profession is full of introverted perfectionists, and perfectionistic individuals set impossibly high standards, seeing any deviation as failure. Our industry's culture of excellence and a zero-mistakes mindset promotes perfectionism and the fear of both failure and success.
- **Guilt and impostor feelings:** This one is common in veterinary medicine. People with impostor syndrome or low self-esteem worry that they can't maintain their performance. The phenomenon convinces you that you're a fraud despite your accomplishments. You attribute your success to luck or overpreparation, and you fear exposure.

Impostor Syndrome

A 2020 British Veterinary Association study showed that 68% of veterinarians experience feelings of impostor syndrome, which presents as self-doubt and the fear of being exposed as a fraud despite clear accomplishments. In veterinary practice, impostor syndrome often occurs alongside low self-esteem, depression and anxiety. It is connected to job dissatisfaction, burnout and compassion fatigue and can lead to the fear of and feeling guilty about success. Those afflicted worry that their high performance isn't sustainable and that their success will raise expectations.

Many of us enter our field out of a compassion for animals rather than for recognition. However, as we assume leadership roles, publish papers or earn peer recognition, we might feel undeserving or fear that we won't meet others' expectations. Our desire to please others increases our anxiety about losing what we achieved.

How It Manifests in Us

Watch for these traits in yourself and your colleagues.

- **Self-sabotage and avoidance:** When success causes anxiety, people might sabotage their goals by procrastinating, exerting minimal effort or rejecting opportunities. I recognized it in myself when I delayed and then postponed a decision about a leadership role. Self-sabotage can also include declining speaking opportunities, undercharging clients, limiting a practice's growth and putting off the launch of new services.
- **Crediting external factors:** Veterinarians with impostor feelings often attribute their success to luck, teamwork or caring clients rather than skill. They tend to dismiss praise and focus on their flaws, which prevents them from recognizing their achievements. When a

BEYOND JONAH

According to *Britannica*, Abraham Maslow was best known for his self-actualization theory of psychology, which argued that the primary goal of psychotherapy should be the integration of the self.



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surgical procedure succeeds, they might think, "I was lucky this time; next time I'll fail." That thought can fuel ongoing anxiety and self-doubt.

- **Hesitation to innovate:** Practice owners might avoid expanding their hospitals or investing in new equipment because they fear public scrutiny or a lack of skills. Clinicians might hesitate to market widely, worried about becoming overwhelmed. These concerns typically stem from low self-efficacy and fears that success could lead to unmanageable pressure.
- **Guilt about surpassing peers:** In close-knit veterinary communities, practitioners often worry about overshadowing their colleagues. They may fear the envy of other professionals or being labeled as self-promoting. Because success can trigger mixed reactions — admiration and jealousy — some veterinarians choose to "play small" to keep the peace. This tendency becomes even stronger when younger veterinarians outperform their mentors.

What You Can Do

Here are eight ways to overcome the Jonah complex.

- **Recognize and normalize the fear:** Awareness is the first step. A fear of success often hides behind excuses like "I don't have time" or "I'm not ready." A supportive workplace that encourages reflection and vulnerability helps veterinarians feel safe voicing these fears.
- **Enhance self-efficacy gradually:** A fear of success is linked to low self-efficacy, so building confidence is crucial. Setting small goals, like discussing a case in team meetings or lecturing at a local veterinary event, can progress to national speaking opportunities.
- **Reframe perfectionism and embrace mistakes:** Perfectionism fuels the fear of success by making anything less than flawless seem like failure. Replace perfectionism with realistic high standards and recognize that failure is part of growth. Practicing self-forgiveness when setbacks happen and cultivating compassion reduces the fear of falling short and success-related guilt.
- **Align personal and professional values:** One way to overcome the fear of success is to be unwavering in your values. When achievements connect to deeper purposes, like animal welfare, mentoring or scientific progress, success feels more meaningful. Veterinary leaders can help by recognizing the diverse definitions of success and celebrating contributions that reflect core values, such as compassionate communication and community outreach.
- **Seek social support and mentorship:** Sharing experiences reduces shame and normalizes fear among veterinary professionals. Mentorship and consulting with peers help demystify success and provide perspective.



DR. NATALIE L. MARKS
The Fearless columnist is an educator, consultant and former Chicago practice owner. A leader within the Fear Free movement, she was a member of the original Fear Free advisory board and is Fear Free Certified Elite. She passionately believes that all veterinarians should be committed to the physical and emotional health of their patients.

- **Engage in growth mindset coaching:** Interventions that foster a growth mindset — the belief that abilities can develop through effort — reduce impostor syndrome and boost resilience. A growth mindset views success as a learning opportunity and encourages individuals to see challenges as growth opportunities rather than threats to self-worth.
- **Practice cognitive reframing:** The fear of success is often fueled by catastrophic thinking, where we focus on worst-case scenarios and see worries as inevitable. Learning to see the potential benefits of success provides balance. In addition, recognizing how the fear of success can lead to missed opportunities, lost income and stagnation can motivate us to make changes. Cognitive behavioral techniques, like replacing the thought "I'll fail if I take this role" with "I will need support to grow," shift the focus from fear to possibility.
- **Consider therapy:** Sometimes, the fear of success can be just as harmful as the fear of failure. Veterinary professionals whose fear disrupts their sleep or daily life should seek help from a licensed therapist. Asking for professional support is a sign of strength.

Embrace Your Calling

We can overcome the fear of failure and the fear of success by building self-efficacy through small challenges, mentorship and a growth mindset and by replacing perfectionism and impostor feelings with self-compassion and values-driven success. Confronting the Jonah complex enables veterinarians to reclaim agency, accept recognition and expand their expertise without compromising their core values. Embracing success with humility promotes personal growth, advances animal welfare and motivates others. TVB

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FINANCIAL WELLNESS

Updating Your Clinic's Retirement Plan

Tax credits, automatic enrollment, contribution limits and catch-ups are factors worthy of consideration.

BY GEOFF S. HUBER, CFP, CHFC, CLU, CKA, AND FRITZ WOOD



Autumn is the time for football, harvest festivals and, of course, reviewing your veterinary practice's 401(k) plan. Secure Act 2.0, signed into law in 2022, is still implementing changes and options for employer retirement plans this year and next. Whether you are considering a first-ever retirement plan, thinking about upgrading from a SIMPLE IRA to a 401(k), or wanting to ensure your current 401(k) is compliant and meets your business's needs, ask yourselves these five questions:

1 Should My Practice Start a Retirement Plan?

For many businesses with no prior retirement plan and fewer than 50 workers, expanded tax credits lower the cost of entry for employer-sponsored plans, including:

- **Startup expense credit:** $250 annually per nonhighly compensated employee (up to $5,000 for three years).
- **Employer contributions:** A tax credit of up to $1,000 per employee earning less than $100,000 a year. Employers with 50 to 100 workers get a reduced credit.
- **Automatic employee enrollment:** $500 credit for three years.

Note that a tax credit — a dollar-for-dollar reduction in the tax you owe — is far more valuable than a tax deduction. Tax credits eliminate most, if not all, of the upfront setup costs of a 401(k) plan. If you've been thinking about offering a 401(k), now may be the time.

2 Should I Upgrade Our Retirement Plan?

Perhaps your veterinary practice offers a SIMPLE IRA. Now might be the time to switch to a 401(k) if:

- You and your employees are nearing IRS contribution limits and want to invest more for retirement.
- Your practice's revenue and profits are increasing.
- You need additional business tax deductions.
- You're looking for ways to recruit, reward and retain top talent.

While you can change from a SIMPLE IRA to a 401(k) midyear, the cleanest time to do it is Jan. 1. See the table on Page 81 for a comparison.

3 Have I Considered Auto-Enrollment?

Automatic enrollment is a growing 401(k) trend and is required for new plans starting in 2025 and beyond. Plans with auto-enrollment set eligible employees at a contribution rate of 3% to 10% if they do nothing. Employees can opt out of the plan or choose a different contribution.

Automatic enrollment drives employee participation and encourages saving for retirement. Often, it pairs with an annual rate escalation — usually by 1% until participants reach 10% to 15% of their compensation. Enrollment can be seamless administratively when the 401(k) and payroll system communicate with each other.

In addition to promoting employee participation and retirement readiness, auto-enrollment opens more Safe Harbor

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	401(k)	SIMPLE IRA
Annual deferral limit	$23,500 plus $7,500 catch-up for 2025	$16,500 plus $3,500 catch-up for 2025
Roth IRA permitted?	Yes	Legally, yes, starting in 2023. In practice, no, because most custodians cannot accommodate it.
Employer contributions required?	Legally, no, but if you want robust participation or the ability to maximize your contributions as a practice owner, yes.	Yes. 3% matching contribution or 2% nonelective contribution.
Discretionary employer contributions allowed?	Yes. Total contribution limit of $70,000 ($77,500 including catch-up) for 2025.	No. Limited to required employer contributions.
File IRS Form 5500?	Yes	No
Vesting schedules?	Yes	No
Participant loans allowed?	Yes, but not recommended.	No
Able to have another retirement plan, such as cash balance plan?	Yes	No



GEOFF S. HUBER
The Financial Wellness co-columnist leads Triune Financial Partners' retirement plan department. He's been in the financial planning industry for three decades, focused solely on retirement plans for over 20 years. He and his team partner with credentialed third-party administrators to serve clients. Together, they work with small- to mid-sized businesses.



FRITZ WOOD
The Financial Wellness co-columnist is a veterinary industry veteran with a special interest in finance.

contribution options for employers. Traditional Safe Harbor match formulas start at 4%, but Safe Harbor QACA plans begin at 3.5%. Traditional Safe Harbor formulas are 100% vested immediately. In contrast, QACA (Qualified Automatic Contribution Arrangement) formulas allow for a two-year vesting schedule, which means employees are 0% vested in employer contributions until reaching two years of service. For practices with higher employee turnover, the vesting schedule encourages longevity, as employees who leave early forfeit matching contributions.

Safe Harbor formula changes must be made as of Jan. 1 and require a 30-day notice to participants. If you are interested in altering your Safe Harbor match or nonelective contribution formula, now is the time to explore it to ensure a timely notice.

4 Is My 401(k) Ready for the New Super Catch-Up?

Starting in 2025, a new contribution limit became available for a small group. Secure Act 2.0 created a super catch-up category for anyone turning ages 60 to 63 during the year. The catch-up limit is $11,250, meaning a participant's total contribution could be $34,750.

Make sure your practice's retirement plan is set up to accept the higher contribution limit. If you or any employees are interested in contributing the maximum and are 60 to 63 years old, contribute no later than Dec. 31.

Watch for the release of 2026 contribution limits.

5 Is My Practice's 401(k) Ready for a Roth Catch-Up?

Beginning in 2026, Secure 2.0 will require all high earners ($145,000 in FICA wages, indexed for inflation each year) to make Roth catch-up contributions. This means catch-up contributions will no longer be tax-deductible for high earners. The rule was scheduled to go into effect in 2024 but was postponed for two years.

Confirm that your plan is ready for the change and allows Roth contributions for all employees. If not, work with your provider to update the plan documents. Otherwise, catch-up contributions will not be permitted.

You also need to work with your payroll processor to ensure its system can process Roth contributions in general as well as Roth catch-ups. Ideally, the payroll system will proactively identify the high earners.

With so many changes in the retirement plan space, having a fiduciary advisor at your side is helpful. Your adviser should keep you abreast of what's new, review your situation regularly, and help you adjust your plan over time to meet your needs. TVB

SOCIALLY ACCEPTABLE

When to Get Personal on Social Media

Veterinarians who show up in a practice's online posts should strike a balance between bonding with clients and revealing too much.

BY CAITLIN DEWILDE, DVM

I was recently invited to participate in career day at my son's elementary school. I was asked to give a short presentation to each of the five second-grade classrooms and to lean into why learning and specific subjects are important for an aspiring veterinarian. While I probably spent too much time on the slideshow, I was relieved to find that most of the students were only concerned with telling me about their pets.

My 7-year-old son was proud of his mom and enjoyed showing off my stethoscope, X-rays and a handful of specimen jars I brought. His teacher took a picture of us, him beaming and me wearing my practice's branded scrubs. "I should post the photo on my practice's socials and tag the school," I thought. And then I reconsidered.

I practice a couple of days a month and spend most of my time as a marketing consultant. I help veterinary teams nationwide figure out what works best on their social media. I've done the work for more than a decade and know unquestionably that the secret to social media success is photos and videos of real people doing the things they love. It resonates with clients, stops them from scrolling, and opens the door to client education and loyal bonds. Showing team members outside of the office, especially when they're doing something that demonstrates their love of pets, people and community, is always a hit with clients.

But yet, I had to pause and think about the classroom photo. While I love marketing, I'm not much of a personal social media user. My general rule of thumb is that if I haven't shared a meal with you, I don't accept your friend request. I don't want to share all the details of my life with the masses.



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Posting a photo of my son and me on my practice's very public social media account seemed different, partially because the picture showed his face and where he goes to school. I also couldn't help feeling that I would be doing it for likes.

What's the proper thing to do? The good news is that there is no one-size-fits-all answer. But a framework can help you decide what, when and how to share content in a way that benefits your practice and protects your privacy.

Why Sharing Matters

Social media isn't just about cute patient photos. It's also about connection. For pet owners, choosing a veterinarian means looking for someone they can trust, and trust is built faster when clients think they know you.

Research consistently shows that posts featuring actual people, regardless of their role in the practice, outperform stock images and text-only content. Real people plus a pet do even better. Personal content resonates because it:

- **Humanizes the profession:** Clients see you as more than a white coat.
- **Builds rapport:** Clients feel a connection when they walk in the door. The bond is particularly true if the two of you have a shared interest, like a kid at the same school, a beloved local sports team or a hobby.
- **Encourages loyalty:** People are more likely to stick with medical providers to whom they feel connected.
- **Differentiates your practice:** Showcasing personalities helps you stand out in a crowded market. That scenario is particularly true at independent practices, which have more flexibility in supporting and

showcasing their unique team members and local involvement.

Sharing Too Much Can Backfire

Before you start livestreaming your Sunday brunch or posting about your child's soccer game, hit the pause button. Sharing on social media comes with risks and drawbacks such as these:

- **Safety concerns:** Veterinarians can be targets of harassment. Posting your home address, vacation dates or child's school (even indirectly) can put you at risk.
- **Blurring boundaries:** Clients don't need access to your entire personal life. Oversharing can make professional interactions uncomfortable.
- **Polarization:** Some practices embrace values-driven posting, but political or polarizing content can alienate segments of your client base.
- **Burnout:** Feeling pressure to always be "on" and share private details can lead to emotional exhaustion.

Two-Part Framework

How do you decide what's appropriate to share? I recommend evaluating posts through these two filters:

- **Comfort:** Am I, my team and everyone in the photo comfortable with it being public?
- **Relevance:** Does the content serve our clients, practice or profession?

If you respond "yes" to both questions, the post is usually safe to share. Examples of what works well include:

- A photo of team members hiking with their dogs. (It's comfortable and relevant.)
- A short post about why you became a veterinarian. (It shares a story and builds a connection.)
- Supporting a neighboring business, such as a team outing. (It displays community support.)
- Celebrating a birthday. (It humanizes the team and builds morale.)

BEING VULNERABLE

One of the most powerful forms of connection is vulnerability. A thoughtful post about a pet you've lost or the challenges of balancing work and family can resonate deeply. But vulnerability requires caution. Ask yourself:

- Am I sharing to connect or vent?
- Will the post help my clients, my practice or my profession?
- Am I prepared for comments, both supportive and critical?

Done well, personal posts can be incredibly meaningful. Done hastily, they can feel unprofessional or expose you to negativity you weren't prepared to handle.



DR. CAITLIN DEWILDE
The Socially Acceptable columnist is the founder of The Social DVM, a consulting firm helping veterinary professionals to manage and grow their social media, online reputation and marketing strategies. The former medical director for a large veterinary hospital in St. Louis, she divides her time today between practice, consulting and writing. She is the author of *Social Media and Marketing for Veterinary Professionals*.

What you should avoid are:

- Posting your child's full name, school and birthday party. (Comfortable? Probably not. Relevant? No.)
- Sharing an angry rant about a difficult client.
- Vacation dates with a "can't wait to get away" remark.

If you're leaning into sharing, set up guardrails such as these:

- **Separate personal from professional accounts:** Use privacy settings to lock down your profile.
- **Establish a policy:** Decide as a team what's off-limits.
- **Review geotagging:** Turn off location tagging on sensitive posts.
- **Ask permission:** Always check with staff members before posting information about them.

Sharing With Intention

Luckily for me, someone took a candid photo of me speaking to the students and posted it on the school's social media. No student faces were visible, and the photo didn't identify my son or the classroom. I shared the image on our practice's social media channels because it helped us achieve our goal of being comfortable and relevant. It also showed that I was committed to supporting the community and young pet owners. I mentioned in the accompanying text that I was helping my son's school, but I left out the specifics.

Showing that I'm a mom with kids has helped me relate to many clients. They know I understand that juggling kids, school, soccer and a cat with diabetes is a lot of work.

Many veterinarians share way more or way less than I have, and it works for them. I recommend sharing enough to humanize yourself, build trust and strengthen client relationships, but not so much that it compromises your safety, boundaries or professionalism.

Every post should pass the comfort and relevance test. Share with intention, not obligation. And measure the results to ensure your strategy benefits the practice. TVB



The Path to Greatness

What kind of career do you have if there is no pressure to improve yourself, no clear meaning in your work and no sense of accomplishment at the end of the day?

BY ANDY ROARK, DVM

The golden retriever who arrived for a DHPP vaccine seemed to smile up at her family, and then she wagged her tail. That's when one of her owners, Melissa, started sobbing and screaming. The entire appointment had been a disaster. It was supposed to be a standard vaccine visit for Sophie, an 11-year-old spayed golden retriever. It turned out to be a quality-of-life consultation for a nonambulatory patient who soiled herself and cried when her owners left the room but who otherwise seemed to be having a great time.

Her owners were a young couple. Sophie had come to live with Melissa 10 years earlier. Details on when Toby, Melissa's husband, joined the picture were sketchy. It was obvious, however, that Sophie and Melissa had fallen in love with Toby at some point, and now they were a family.

Sophie had terrible osteoarthritis in her back, hips and knees, rendering her unable to walk. She ate and drank normally and greatly enjoyed her owners' attention. She cried whenever her family left whatever room she was in, and she routinely soiled herself. She also required extensive nursing care to manage her lack of mobility. Toby and Melissa wanted to know if Sophie was suffering and how they would recognize when it was time to put her down.

The worst part was that Sophie put on displays that seemed to communicate happiness. She would wag her tail excitedly whenever Toby or Melissa looked at her. She would nose nearby hands as if demanding to be petted, and she would excitedly gobble up any treats offered to her.

Still, nursing this 95-pound dog was a challenge, and it was only getting worse, as Melissa was five months

pregnant and getting less and less mobile herself. (She told me that was why she was reacting emotionally in the exam room and struggling to decide what to do with Sophie).

It's a strange feeling to stand in an exam room, holding a DHPP vaccine, and realize that the vaccine appointment is actually a life decision and possibly a euthanasia appointment. I think most veterinarians can remember a time when they discovered that some pet owners scheduled a vaccination because they couldn't bring themselves to say "euthanasia."

After the initial examination, Melissa looked at me tearfully and asked, "Is my dog suffering?" I had no idea what to say, so I took a deep breath, steadied myself and replied, "Well, it depends. Let's talk about this."

That's when Toby leaned forward, phone in hand, and said, "I'm going to ask ChatGPT what to do."

As I tried to process what Toby had just said, I couldn't help but wonder if that was our future. Will a tide of technology lift us all from uncertainty and deliver us to clarity and bliss? Looking at Melissa's suddenly sour face, I wasn't convinced that everyone is sold on the idea that technology is the solution to all our problems.

What Will Remain of the General Practice Vet?

Most of us imagine society's progress as a straight line. After all, over the past 200 years, industries like manufacturing, medicine and technology have gotten steadily better. But the reality is that material or technological advancements do not equate to any sort of moral, spiritual or intellectual progress. Sure, the industrial revolution brought us assembly lines to crank out products, but it also turned workers into cogs in a single-purpose machine. Cellphones gave us the ability to always be connected and opened the path for us to be chained to our work in ways we never imagined. The advancement of capitalism has driven unprecedented innovation and extreme (and growing) wealth inequality. For every advantage we have gained, there seems to be a cost.

As I look at how veterinary medicine is advancing today, I see things like:

- Technicians being better leveraged (and compensated) than ever before.
- Veterinary specialists engaging the most challenging cases.
- Artificial intelligence in scribe and diagnostic equipment churning out differential diagnoses, educational resources for clients and recommendations for next steps.
- Websites promising telehealth consultations and the subsequent home delivery of products.
- People pushing for midlevel veterinary professionals to address the perceived demand for services.

I am not condemning any of those advancements. Few people have championed the effective utilization of and higher compensation for techs more than I have. I routinely refer cases to specialists, worry about keeping care affordable for pet owners, and think convenience is a vital component in making sure pets get the medications they need. I'm also a fan of AI scribes and don't want to go back to practicing without them. I recognize that all these advancements demand sacrifices.

The question now is, "What will these sacrifices entail, and will they be worth the downside?" Once we delegate our technical work to our fully competent technicians, our simple wellness cases to midlevel professionals, our advanced cases to specialists and our requests for medications to online providers (and then run all remaining cases through AI for advice), what will remain for the general practitioner to do? When pet owners have reliable, informed artificial intelligence support that has endless time and patience and a willingness to dive deeply into the specifics of a single pet's health status, how will the GP be perceived in the exam room?

As I reflect on ChatGPT's sudden appearance at Sophie's appointment, I think it makes sense to be concerned about how the role of veterinarians in animal health care is changing.

I don't think veterinarians will disappear like the lamplighters, ice deliverymen and telegraph operators did when technology made them obsolete. I do worry, however, that we will suffer from a crisis of purpose, growth and utility. Yes, this is unfortunately the position that professionals across other industries find themselves in, but many of us chose veterinary medicine specifically to avoid such a fate.

The Temptation of Support

Imagine, for a moment, that you know a brand-new veterinarian named

BE A BETTER LEADER

Dr. Andy Roark has partnered with VetFolio to release the Uncharted Leadership Essentials Certificate. The program provides training appropriate for anyone who leads or manages others. The topics covered include setting a team's vision and values, building trust, achieving team buy-in, delivering feedback, understanding communication styles, setting priorities, delegating effectively and managing time. Learn more at bit.ly/Uncharted-VetFolio.

William. On William's first day in practice, he is paired with an experienced doctor. This doctor has an incredible breadth and depth of knowledge, was trained with medical standards and sources you find acceptable, sees no cases, is immediately available to William 24/7, and happens to work for the tiniest of salaries. This mentor answers every question William has. She writes William's records for him, gives him helpful tips about things to consider, and is ready to consult on any case William asks about. Also, her assignment to William is indefinite, so there is no expectation that William will ever need to work without his mentor.

My question for you is this: Do you think William will turn out to be a great doctor?

We can see how William might get into trouble here. It's possible he will allow himself to become a pair of hands for his mentor as opposed to an excellent clinician in his own right. Some will say this risk is so high that William should shun his mentor to avoid becoming reliant on her. But when have we ever benefited from turning our backs on useful information? Who among us has rejected help because it was too effective? Not utilizing an adviser made so available to us almost feels unfair to our patients.

Fortunately, William can use this mentor to make himself more valuable, not less. He can turn his mentor into the teacher she is intended to be rather than the supervisor and director she could become. It all depends on William, though, and the choices he makes hour after hour and day after day. It will come down to the path on which William spends his time walking.

We are headed into a world where every veterinarian (and technician and pet owner), regardless of experience level, will have ever-present advisers, mentors and helpers through AI and other technological advancements. We will then have a choice to make regarding how we will allow these tools to affect our careers. Most of us will choose the path of least resistance. We will focus on completing our job in the most efficient, predictable and comfortable way possible, as that approach will be immediately easier and maximally profitable. Some of us, however, will opt to take a much harder path. We will decide that being great is not the same as getting easy answers, hitting the "Approve invoice" button as quickly as possible, or making whatever choices are most comfortable.

The Road to Ruin

There's an old saying that the road to ruin is broad, gently sloping and full of friends. The idea here is that long-term pain often comes from pleasurable short-term decisions, and there's no shortage of people who will do what feels best in the moment. As I look at society, I can see the road to ruin stretching out seductively before us, and it would just be so easy to —

As I write these words, I glance at the top of my Google document and see an AI button that could generate a paragraph or two for me in a matter of seconds. In my pocket, my cellphone promises that I need not experience a single moment of boredom in my day. On my laptop, I can ask ChatGPT almost any question that comes to mind and have an immediate answer. There's not a single point in my week when I am more than two minutes away from a snack. I can be picked up by an Uber whenever I get tired of walking, and I can hand my kids an iPad whenever I need a moment of peace. All my friends are doing these things as well.

What an easy lifestyle I can have. What a smooth path. But where does this road go? Will we become better people if we don't have to learn anything because we can just ask AI? Will we be happier when we and our family members are constantly distracted? Will we be more fulfilled in veterinary practice when we have an adviser like William does?

I do not think so, and I want to get off this road.

The Dangers of Comfort and Convenience

When I was in my first year in practice, I joined a large hospital along with five other new vet school graduates. We all wanted to be great doctors, to learn and grow, and to do so while keeping a reasonable work-life balance. One day, a senior doctor mentioned to me and another new vet that he would be doing an interesting surgery the next day. He asked if we wanted to watch. We both had the day off and told the senior doctor we would be there if we could. The next day, I stayed home and enjoyed my day off. My colleague set aside his free time and went to the clinic.

DEFINING A GOLDEN

The American Kennel Club's breed standard for a golden retriever says this about its general appearance:

"A symmetrical, powerful, active dog, sound and well put together, not clumsy nor long in the leg, displaying a kindly expression and possessing a personality that is eager, alert and self-confident. Primarily a hunting dog, he should be shown in hard-working condition. Overall appearance, balance, gait and purpose to be given more emphasis than any of his component parts."

Other criteria are at bit.ly/3JfTFjl.

A few days later, I asked my friend about the case. Turns out it was quite interesting. My friend talked about scrubbing in, assisting with the procedure, and learning not just about the case but about the senior doctor's experience with and philosophy on veterinary surgery in general. I regretted not being there.

I have always believed in not letting work take over one's life, and sometimes we all genuinely need a break. On that day, however, I could have made time if I'd wanted to. I just wanted to have an easy day instead. I wanted to be comfortable, and staying home was convenient.

The desire for comfort and convenience isn't unusual or difficult to understand. After all, society's march toward reducing discomfort has been tireless and wildly successful. Just think about the comforts and conveniences that people a mere century ago were denied that we take for granted: air conditioning, indoor plumbing, non-scratchy clothes, refrigerators, washing machines, escalators, automobiles, television, Wi-Fi, endless libraries of electronic books and streaming music, restaurants for every type of food, and the ability to email instead of interacting with an actual person, just to name a few.

The march of comfort and convenience has been amazing! How many stairs have we not had to climb because of the creation of the elevator? Think of the sore hamstrings and burning buttocks we have avoided and all the times we didn't have to break a sweat.

I recently wondered whether anyone thinks elevators are a bad thing. We are, after all, a now-sedentary nation wrestling with obesity and heart disease. I wondered how professional mountain climbers feel about elevators. If your job and passion were trudging upward, would you sing the praises of elevators? Would you shun them and condemn them as an affront to the art of working hard to move vertically? Probably not. I suspect you would recognize that elevators are an efficient way to get a job done. You would also probably realize that if you don't make sure to put in decent time and effort trudging upward the old-fashioned way, then you're not going to be very good at your job for very long.

That is how I think veterinarians need to look at AI and other professional advancements. We are intellectual mountain climbers. What makes us special is our ability to push ourselves upward through our capacity to focus, reflect, synthesize, empathize and explain. Yes, we could skip the hard work and take the AI elevator, and in some cases, that's what we should do. Just as a mountain climber who only uses elevators is merely a button-presser, a veterinarian who only follows AI's directives is simply a pair of hands. We must avoid both the inefficiency of always taking the stairs and the loss of competency that comes from never challenging ourselves.

Going forward, great veterinarians will be those who have no problem utilizing AI for their patients' benefit but will resist turning to AI for every possible convenience it offers. Great vets will not be the students who ask their adviser what to do next. Instead, they will devise a plan and then ask their adviser for feedback. They will make time and space to do the uncomfortable mental lifting that is required to stay intellectually strong, even when they could kick back and ask ChatGPT what it thinks.

"But wait," you say. "Using AI to get immediate answers to any and all questions I have isn't going to make me a worse doctor! It's not the same as mountain climbers riding elevators instead of hiking. Using AI is going to make me supersmart."

Unfortunately, that's not what is happening. As people leverage AI for more complex or creative applications, we are beginning to see what is known as the automation paradox.

The automation paradox is a situation where increased automation causes reduced human involvement and, ultimately, reduced human competency. The paradox arises as this automation is intended to improve efficiency and reduce human involvement. Still, it also increases the likelihood of humans becoming less skilled and less equipped to handle unexpected issues. In medicine, it looks like a profession of caregivers who become so comfortable getting answers from AI that they lose the ability to act effectively without it.

A MIT Media Lab study found that people who used AI chatbots like ChatGPT to write essays showed significantly lower neural activity and brain engagement in areas related to

SELF-ASSESSMENT

Ask AI for a few fun facts about AI, and it responds this way in less than a second:

- AI can read emotions.
- AI writes its own music.
- AI is used in sports.
- AI helps discover new planets.
- AI is already all around us.
- AI can help combat climate change.
- AI can diagnose diseases.
- AI can help reduce bias.
- AI can predict the future (sort of).

memory, creativity and language processing compared to those who wrote essays without AI. The research also found that the AI-using group had a much harder time recalling pieces from their essays, possibly indicating that the deep-memory processes required for long-term retention had been bypassed. This type of cognitive atrophy should terrify anyone who sees themselves as a professional thinker and fixer of problems.

Relatedly, I saw someone online celebrating that, with the help of AI summaries, he could read more than one classic novel every day. He was thrilled with the ease and efficiency with which he could devour classics such as *War and Peace, Ulysses, The Brothers Karamazov* and *Jane Eyre*. As I pondered those words, I thought back to the mountain climber riding up and down in the elevator.

Is riding in an elevator the same as being a mountain climber? No.

Is using AI to create an essay the same as crafting one with our own hands? No.

Is reading a summary of *To Kill a Mockingbird* the same as consuming and considering each line? No.

Is handing our cases over to AI the same as being a great caregiver? The answer has to be no.

There's nothing wrong with elevators, summaries or AI suggestions of differential diagnoses. There is, however, something wrong with mountain climbers who only ride elevators, authors who don't actually write, avid readers who consume only summaries and doctors who outsource their thinking to an app.

The good news is we all have the choice of whether and how much to use these capabilities. In that choice, the path to greatness in medicine and to a meaningful life in the modern world remains accessible. The passage is narrow and steep, and few will choose it, but it is there for those who desire it. We must intentionally decide how much time we spend on the comfortable and convenient road and how much we dedicate to climbing the steep, challenging path to greatness in our chosen field. There is still a need, after all, for great clinicians.



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The Discharge Notes columnist is a practicing veterinarian, international speaker and author. He founded the Uncharted Veterinary Conference. His Facebook page, podcast, website [drandyroark.com], and YouTube show reach millions of people every month. His column won first place in the Florida Magazine Association's 2023 Charlie Awards.

The Golden Retriever Visit

Back in the exam room with Sophie, Melissa did not want to hear what ChatGPT had to say about her beautiful, nonambulatory golden retriever. It turns out that not everyone wants to put their trust and the fate of beloved family members entirely in the hands of technology.

"I want to hear what Dr. Roark thinks," she told her husband.

In that moment, there was no objectively right or wrong answer. There was no dataset to be searched. There were only questions about what mattered to the family at a human level. There were only considerations about what Melissa and Toby wanted, what they were afraid of, and what they believed made a good life, a loving death and lifelong memories. There was only a need for support that another human can provide and a deep desire for wisdom, which is not the same as information that can be Googled.

As I talked to Melissa and Toby about my experience with cases like theirs, and they told me and each other how they felt, I understood the power of a great caregiver.

I might not always be the best veterinarian, although I try my best. I can always be a human being, though. I can always empathize and share the wisdom I have picked up from laying my hands on pets and asking people about the experiences and emotions that make life and death matter to them. I can always work to improve myself, painful as that process is. And I can always choose to do what will make me better rather than what will make me comfortable.

We may all come up short some days in measuring what it means to be great, but we can try to climb that steep and narrow path rather than drift gently along the comfortable and convenient road to ruin. That is our choice, and no one can take it away from us. TVB

STORY ARCHIVE

Veterinarian and award-winning columnist Dr. Andy Roark has contributed to *Today's Veterinary Business* since 2017. Among his articles are these:

- *"Our Profession's Growth Spurt,"* go.navc.com/growth-TVB
- *"Rekindling the Love of Work,"* go.navc.com/love-TVB
- *"Strategic Stress,"* go.navc.com/stress-TVB

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* Source: Survey conducted among small animal veterinarians who recommended animal supplements.