

TEN PRACTICE TIPS FOR AVIAN AND EXOTIC PET VETERINARIANS

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At the time of writing this presentation, I have been in private practice for nearly 28 years, 23 of them in my own practice. Below are listed ten tips that I believe have helped me, in a practical sense, to develop and enjoy my practice.

Maintain Your Interest Through Education

Anyone who thinks that veterinary medicine is not advancing will find themselves bored and leaving practice sooner, rather than later. Attending conferences, discussing cases with colleagues, on-line forums such as Veterinary Information Network (VIN), BirdMed, Exotic DVM, and AAVAC, and reading journals are all excellent means of maintaining your knowledge and your enthusiasm. This does mean finding the time to do this - try not to steal too much from your family!

Do not forget that not all knowledge lies within veterinary domains. Attending avicultural conventions, herpetological sales, reading lay magazines, etc can increase your knowledge on husbandry and unusual species - information that nearly always seems to come in handy, further down the track.

Market Yourself Well

Many clients believe that 'all veterinarians are created equal', and they can't believe that you are charging more than the practice down the road - after all, they said they treat birds as well. To get these clients through the door, you have to market yourself to them, highlighting why they should come to your practice.

The first step is to identify where your new clients come from. This can be done by simply asking them! Repeated analyses of 'new client questionnaires' at the West Toowoomba Veterinary Surgery have shown us that most of our clients come to us because of word of mouth or because they live nearby; the Yellow pages are usually only used to get our phone number. Using this information, we have systematically reduced our Yellow Pages advertising budget, while increasing our word of mouth referrals through rewards programs. Our advertising costs have come down, and the number of new clients is increasing.

Ensure the presentation of your practice is smart and professional, from its external appearance through to your letterhead. Make sure your staff look and behave professionally. Have a professional business card, and have cards for your staff - and then give them to new or potential clients.

Establish your reputation in the community as an 'exotics' veterinarian through school visits, newspaper stories, magazine articles - and then let your word of mouth advertising work for you.

Educate your clients

Well-educated clients are good clients. If you haven't got a good website – work on it now! Clients are increasingly techno-savvy. They look for information on the 'Net and then come to the source. Good websites and practice handouts can save you plenty of time in the consult room, and reinforce what you have told your client. If they can hear it, read it and see it, they are more likely to believe it.

Take Good Care of Your Patients While They Are in Hospital

Your clients want the best for their pets – that's why they came to you. Have a dedicated ward for the exotic pets, and always have it in such a condition that you never have to be embarrassed to take a client in to it. Keep it clean, tidy, and heated. Things we have found useful include dedicated cages, PVC perches, heated rooms and cages, an ICU cage, and a variety of dry, fresh and frozen foods.

Weigh every animal in hospital, every day, and record it. Create a 'daily hospitalisation' template on your computer, and ensure that it is written up every morning by you and your staff.

Teach your staff how to give subcutaneous fluids, intramuscular injections, tube feed animals, and so on. Then they can do this while you focus on developing and refining your treatment plan.

Be Comfortable with Anaesthesia

There is a saying: the sum of the heart rates of the anaesthetist and the patient remains constant. Anaesthesia is one of the more stressful things we as clinicians do. But you can reduce much of this stress by establishing an anaesthetic protocol and following it – and make sure all your staff knows what is expected. At the West Toowoomba Veterinary Surgery, for example, all birds undergoing major surgical procedures are firstly weighed and have blood collected for a haematocrit, total plasma protein and blood glucose. They are then pre-medicated with butorphanol and, after 20 minutes, mask-induced with isoflurane. After intubation they are placed on a mechanical ventilator (Vetronics) and a Doppler placed over the ventral antebrachium to monitor heart rate. An intravenous catheter is placed and fluids are given via a syringe pump at 10mls/kg/hour. Although this seems to be a lot of effort, with rehearsal and practice it becomes automatic – and we get excellent results and a more relaxed veterinarian!

Have the Right Tools for Surgery

Ophthalmic and microsurgical instruments, haemoclips, Lone Star retractors, magnification and illumination - these are the tools of the trade and, without them, avian surgery is much more complicated. Purchase them piece by piece until you have a good selection, and then care for them. You may only need a pair of microsurgical ring-tipped forceps a few times a year but – when you need them - you'll be glad you had them!

Do You Need In-house Diagnostics?

There are some very good reasons for not investing in in-house diagnostics, the best one been a very short turnaround time for an external lab. I would suggest, however, that if your turnaround time is more than 4 hours, you need to consider in-house diagnostics. A centrifuge, refractometer, Diff-Quik® and Gram's stains, dry chemistry/biochemistry machines and a good microscope are the basic units

needed in an exotics practice. Knowledge and practice to do haematology, faecal and crop screens, biochemistry profiles and other limited tests are essential.

Medications

There are very few medications registered for use in birds and exotic pets. But many of the medications used in medicine and veterinary practice can be used, with or without modification, in an avian and exotic pets practice. The use of a compounding pharmacist or even just methylcellulose to dilute medications is an essential part of daily practice. A book such as the “Exotic Animal Formulary” is a vital reference.

Learn how to administer medications and teach your staff and your clients how to do it.

Necropsy Everything

There are few learning tools as powerful or as useful as a necropsy on a patient that died, whether expected or not. Wherever possible, perform a necropsy to learn what the normal and the abnormal look like, and what went wrong. Keep tissues in formalin, and sent them to a pathologist whenever you can. Ideally, get the client to pay for it!

Charge for What You do

There seems to be an expectation amongst clients (and some veterinarians) that we should charge by the kilo for the practice of veterinary medicine. If we adopt this pricing model, we will all go broke before Christmas! Don't be apologetic for charging an appropriate fee, based on time and overheads (not patient weight), for the practice of good and sound medicine. And make sure you charge for everything you do. Remember, everything done in a veterinary practice has to be paid - the only choice you have is whether the client pays or whether you do. It is preferable that the client pays!