

## DEVELOPING AN AVIAN/EXOTIC REFERRAL PRACTICE IN YOUR CLINIC – SOME PRACTICAL TIPS

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This presentation is intended as a guide for practitioners looking to develop a referral stream of avian and exotic patients within their existing practice. For those who are wanting to take this a step further and develop a recognized specialty, other publications may be more relevant.

### WHY TARGET THE REFERRAL MARKET?

In general, a referred client will be more dedicated and motivated as they have searched for a quality service. This often results in more satisfying cases and fewer cost limitations for treatment you provide. As referred clients are willing to travel further, the caseload may also be higher than if only the local area is targeted for marketing. This allows a greater exposure to patients and a faster learning curve for the practitioner.

The profit margin on referred cases is likely to be higher than primary care cases making for a more stable clinic and the option of greater investment in capital.

A down side to referral cases is increased client expectations. This can be a drain in an already stressful environment and should be considered. The majority of clients are happy to find a veterinarian willing to assist and realise their expectations.

### YOUR SKILL BASE

Before providing a referral service, the practitioner must be confident in having something to offer! Veterinarians are often their own greatest critics, with many capable practitioners might choosing to avoid exotics and avian practice for fear of not being “good enough”.

The level of exotics knowledge of general veterinary practitioners is low due to lack of training and exposure. The motivation for many to devote effort in this area is also low (due to perceived poor financial returns, lack of equipment or simply being too busy with more “conventional” animal species.) With this in mind, it is not difficult to provide a far superior level of care to this group of patients.

Good sources of continuing education for exotic/avian patients include:

- Printed: textbooks, periodicals (good examples are the Journal of Avian Medicine and Surgery and Exotic DVM);
- On-line: (VIN, BirdMed, UEP forum);
- Colleagues (many recognised experts are very willing to offer assistance);
- Post-graduate courses; and
- via practicing techniques on wildlife cases. (Rather than seeing non-threatened wild

species as a drain on resources, use them as cases to improve your skills without an owner breathing down your neck! Before euthanasing terminal wild cases, practice surgical procedures in a deep anaesthetic plane).

With these resources and qualifications, a general practitioner is able to draw from a wealth of knowledge, making the diagnostic and treatment challenges manageable.

It is for each practitioner to decide what level of skill and experience is needed before promoting their skills in this area. You might choose to initially limit the range of species seen, until your experience grows. Once a reputation for treating “unusual” pets is established, there is often a demand from clients to expand the range.

In the author’s experience, a common limitation is being too cautious. Without some self confidence and the willingness to step outside your comfort zone, it is difficult to progress. Even the most experienced exotics veterinarians are regularly presented with new situations, so expecting to know it all before you start is unrealistic!

## **YOUR BUSINESS PLAN**

While the veterinary profession is founded on some essential ethical principles, other business related factors have to be considered equally carefully. If your efforts are not rewarded in financial terms the practice may not be sustainable.

Ask yourself “Is avian/exotic practice a business or a hobby?”. If you choose to fund the venture with your own capital then you determine the answer. If you are relying on your practice owner(s) to fund your time and the required capital expense, they will reasonably expect a financial return (profit). This will determine many of the decisions you make when developing a business plan. Some important questions:

- Are you treating wildlife only? If so a profit is unlikely!
- Can you run the venture as a registered charity?
- Are you providing your time on a voluntary basis or are you expecting a wage?
- What staff will you require to assist with these patients? - do they expect to be paid?
- How many patients do you expect to treat?
- How much capital is required to provide the necessary equipment? What is the cost of borrowing the money? Over what period will you pay this back? How long will the asset last? How often will it be used and charged for?
- What premises are you using? Space in an existing clinic?, additional space? – will there be a cost to use this space? (ongoing lease, fit-out costs).
- Who else in the area is providing care for exotics patients? (do not compete with a recognized expert).
- What happens to your business and your patients should you be unable to treat them in future?
- Get sound accounting advice before spending any money on the venture.

Charging rates are a crucial part of your business plan as they determine the viability of the business. Too low and you will not make a profit. Too high and your services may be out of reach of your client base. Ask colleagues who operate similar practices for some guidelines on charging rates. As a general rule, charge at least the same rate as you would for the same procedure in a dog or cat,

otherwise you undermine your claim that you are providing a quality service. For charitable cases there will be restrictions on the funding available; however additional donations can be sought from other clients of the practice by placing a donation box on your front counter and promoting your services in this area.

## **YOUR EQUIPMENT**

You cannot treat avian/exotic patients without at least some specialized equipment. The amount you purchase is determined largely by your business plan. The following is a list of essentials in the author's opinion that are less likely to be found in many traditional veterinary practices:

- Good quality microscope with 40x – 1000x magnification;
- Gram and diff-quick staining solutions;
- Incubator(s);
- A quiet room to hospitalize patients away from predator species;
- Accurate weigh scales (minimum 1g increments but ideally 0.1g);
- A range of crop needles and stomach tubes;
- Specialised ET tubes to suit the species you will see;
- Mammography radiography plates and film (or digital radiography);
- Endoscope and light source (for endoscopy and small mammal intubation). A video option is helpful but not essential and is extra cost;
- Isoflurane or sevoflurane anaesthetic vaporizer;
- Customised anaesthetic circuits for small patients;
- Surgical warming devices (radiant  $\pm$  warm air);
- Doppler Blood Pressure monitor (for heart monitoring, and establishing death in reptiles/amphibians); and
- In house blood testing (the small sample volume for some machines makes it feasible to sample patients you might otherwise not be able to if using an external laboratory).

There is a long list of other items that would prove useful, however additional items may be more difficult to justify in financial terms. These should be assessed on a case by case basis.

## **YOUR STAFF**

Support staff are an essential part of a successful practice. Once your reputation for exotic practice spreads expect to be approached by staff wanting to work in this area. Thus, a side-effect of developing an exotics practice may be an over-supply of motivated nurse candidates for future hiring! Training is clearly essential. If current staff are not available to demonstrate technical procedures, consider practicing on cadavers and then wildlife patients - before beloved pets. Working in a local wildlife shelter can be a good way for your support staff to gain experience and should be encouraged. Paying these staff for the time they spend there is a good investment if training is otherwise difficult to provide.

Finding qualified (or even motivated) veterinary staff can be a challenge in exotic practice when the time comes to expand. The pool of experience is often small, and many express an interest in ecology and conservation but are uncomfortable with the demands of a busy commercial practice. Continuing education should be actively encouraged for those that do demonstrate some ability and drive. In the author's experience, a foundation of experience in companion animal practice is helpful

in selecting a practitioner for exotics work (the base of knowledge of internal medicine and surgery of dogs and cats can be usefully applied to exotics).

## **YOUR AFTER-HOURS SERVICE**

An important question before opening the doors to your exotics practice is “Who will be looking after the patients out of hours?”. There is a trade off between the quality of care of the patients and the quality of life of the clinician. If there is only you, you cannot be there 24/7! Burn-out is a very real threat if a practitioner takes on too much so some sensible boundaries should be created. If you have a dedicated after-hours clinic in your area and wish to use them, work with them to increase the skill of their staff. They should be capable of at least stabilising patients. During weekends, many hospitalised patients can be managed by a capable nursing roster. They will need assistance with some cases.

## **YOUR MARKETING**

Once you have established your clinic, you will need some clients! Referrals can be sourced from:

### **1. Other Veterinary Clinics**

There are several advantages to targeting your marketing to other practices. Clinics are readily identifiable and of a limited number. Many will be keen to support a colleague and are seeking a place to send exotics patients! A client that has visited or called their local veterinarian for advice is more likely to value that advice and be willing to pay for it. Try writing a regular newsletter for all the clinics in your region. Detail interesting or quirky cases and explain to them how your services work. Send referral forms and clinic brochures with these to be passed out to their clients. Remember how busy day to day practice is! Keep your newsletters brief and use lots of colour pictures to grab attention. If you feel confident, hold an evening seminar for veterinarians and discuss common problems they encounter with exotics. This education will be rewarded with loyalty and ongoing referral cases.

### **2. Pet Shops**

Building a relationship with places that sell your prospective patients means new owners will be aware of your services from day one. Provide brochures to be given out when animals are purchased, discount vouchers for a post-sale check-up, or offer to check all animals in the store before sale. You may be able to assist with the store’s staff training program, to encourage animals sold with good husbandry information. This effort will be rewarded with loyal referral behavior. Many shops will have an existing relationship with another clinic for their dog/cat needs. Discuss your involvement with the other clinic to avoid “treading on toes” and limit your advice to exotics patients.

### **3. Breeders**

See the notes on pet shops. In the author’s experience this is the least rewarding area for referrals. Many breeders are entrenched in outdated practices and are often reluctant to change. They may also become easily offended by your attempts to help!

The exceptions to these rules are worth spending time with. Get in touch with the local

parrot clubs, pigeon fanciers, etc and offer to give talks at meetings on relevant subjects.

Other marketing methods include:

- Website: This is becoming an essential tool for marketing and providing clients information without tying up your phone lines.
- Vehicle signage: If clients don't think to look for an exotics veterinarian they probably won't find you! Vehicle signage that clearly states what you do can be an effective way of telling the world of your existence.
- Phone books: Some investment in this area is probably warranted for exotics clinics. While many veterinary advertisements might be lost in a sea of similar looking ads, you have an opportunity to stand out. Boldly state the species you see as most clinics will not advertise these services.
- Television and News stories: There is a lot of interest in exotics patients from the general public and they often make popular news stories. Newspapers and television are all too happy to run stories featuring your work so take advantage of this when you can. Of course all representations should be accurate, professional and with the consent of owners.

### **YOUR REFERRAL RELATIONSHIP**

Once you have received a referral from a vet clinic, pet shop or breeder, it is important to recognise that this is a special relationship. You have two clients - the owner of the patient and also the person who made the referral. Both have needs that must be satisfied if they are to choose you again in future.

The needs of the owner:

These are the same as for all patient owners: professional care of their animal and to be kept informed of all treatments, costs and prognosis.

The needs of the referral source:

If the referral has come from another veterinary clinic you have a statutory obligation to report your findings to them in a timely manner. Producing a report is your opportunity to inform and also impress the other clinic. This reinforces their decision to choose you and will likely result in future referral cases. Be precise and use the appropriate anatomical and technical terms when writing reports. Keep it brief and to the point.

Breeders and pet shops do not require the same level of feedback information, however they still may be interested in hearing the outcome of the case – particularly if it is an issue that may reflect badly on their facility. This is an opportunity to assist them in improving the care of their animals. Handling the situation tactfully without implying blame will result in loyalty and a more productive working relationship. In all cases respect the privacy of the animal's owner.

The best way to destroy a referral relationship is to betray the trust you have been given by the referral source. They are operating a business and will not tolerate any attempt (perceived or real) to take future business from them. Be careful to avoid this perception in the following examples:

- The client brings their bird and asks if you will also treat their cat and dog who have been under the care of the referring vet clinic;
- The client and their rabbit are referred by another veterinarian for dental work and the client asks if you could also administer its regular calicivirus vaccine while there; and
- A pet shop that also sells the same range of pet foods and toys as you refers animals for post-sale checks.

Remember – the value of the extra sale will be small compared with the future value of the referral relationship. It is often better to put the interests of the referral source over the request of the animal owner in these situations. Explain to the owner that you are bound by the ethics of the relationship. Only administer additional, non-essential treatments after consent from the referring vet clinic.

### **SUMMARY**

Referral cases offer a great opportunity to practice good medicine at good rates for good pet owners. Be realistic about your skills and be honest about areas in which you feel less experienced. Do not allow the idea that you don't know everything stop you either! You will likely provide a valuable source of care to patients that might otherwise go without.

Equip yourself well and charge appropriately to justify the investment. Make the most of any opportunities for Continuing Education and enjoy the “vertical learning curve”.