

Telemedicine: An Opportunity to Educate the Public

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As we face a veterinary labor shortage, increased owner investment in their pet's healthcare, and traditional paradigms upended by the COVID-19 pandemic, options like veterinary telemedicine have gained greater attention nationwide. Companies like Vetster, Chewy, and JustAnswer are all vying for their piece of the pie in this new landscape, leading to lobbying of state governments for changes in veterinary practice acts to allow for the virtual establishment of veterinarian-client-patient relationships (VCPRs). (1) As with any situation, the concept of veterinary telemedicine has pros and cons. I'll spend the following paragraphs first outlining the pros and cons as I see them, then discussing potential solutions we can create to address the challenges that telemedicine may present.

As I see it, one of the most significant advantages of veterinary telemedicine is that it can reduce barriers to veterinary care in specific populations. Individuals who are homebound or with limited access to the outside world due to age, transport challenges, or disability can more easily receive veterinary advice and care through telemedicine. In their 2018 report on access to veterinary care, the Access to Veterinary Care Coalition (AVCC) identified lack of transportation as a significant barrier to preventative veterinary care for 11.8% of surveyed respondents. (2) Additionally, telemedicine can benefit remote communities or underserved communities where the nearest veterinarian might be 50 or even 100 miles away. Lack of access to a veterinarian for sick care was identified as a significant barrier to care for 14% of high-income respondents and 13% of low-income respondents. (2)

Telemedicine certainly offers elements of convenience to the busy pet owner as well. The pet owner does not need to leave their home and can avoid the hassle of loading their pet into the car and waiting in the clinic. For the equine and food animal field, telemedicine can also prevent "windshield time" – time spent driving your truck out to a farm. Most practices charge mileage rates for their drives out to clients alongside the usual fees. Talking to a producer or horse owner over text, phone calls, or video chat gives the veterinarian more time to see other patients and can reduce the bill for the client.

Conversely, it is worth considering how telemedicine may impact our patients' quality of care. Any practitioner can make a mistake, even in the clinic. However, a significant risk comes with the absence of a thorough physical exam. Every veterinarian knows that things are rarely as simple as they might appear on the surface. Conditions like ear infections, eye infections, a cough, or a limp all need physical exams to be treated safely and effectively. Telemedicine is best used as a triage and follow-up care tool instead of a tool for the initial evaluation of a disease process.

While telemedicine is still a hotly debated topic in the veterinary field, six states now allow for the remote establishment of a VCPR. (1) We need to create a plan as a profession to incorporate telemedicine responsibly. I suggest two areas of consideration to protect our patients and ourselves.

The first area that I would suggest is that state and national veterinary organizations lobby to set limits on the scope of practice allowed for telemedicine in each state's veterinary practice act. Establishing a virtual VCPR may not always be harmful and can sometimes result in a strong partnership between the client and the doctor. However, as James Penrod, the executive



director of AAVSB, said to VIN News Service in 2018, “Telemedicine is not appropriate for all cases.” (3) There should be restrictions placed on types of appointments that can be seen for initial evaluation remotely, to ensure that a high standard of care is provided for a patient. We are experts and must assert that to protect our profession and patients.

Second, it should be made clear to clients that telemedicine consultations are not a replacement for an in-person appointment. This should be communicated by showing the value of an in-person appointment and billing appropriately for a doctor’s time in telemedicine appointments. Doing physical exams in the room with the client, explaining tests and findings as you go along and answering questions can show clients the value of a hands-on exam.

A 2008 study published in JAVMA noted that only 8% of veterinary clients recognized that their pet had been examined during clinic visits. (4) A 2022 study by researchers at Ontario Veterinary College identified using the “talking physical exam” as a critical method to communicate the value of a physical exam to owners. (5) Additionally, using low-stress handling and positive reinforcement during the visit can help even the most fearful patients warm up to the vet visit. Simultaneously, practices need to work to design a comparable fee structure for telemedicine consultations when compared to in-person appointments.

Veterinary medicine is often marketed as a career for animal lovers. While we certainly spend a lot of time with animals, we need to lean into communication with people – legislators, clients, and colleagues – to communicate the value of our unique skill set. If we take the steps outlined above while simultaneously incorporating telemedicine visits where indicated and appropriate, we can achieve a veterinary landscape that judiciously uses telemedicine while prioritizing patient care.

Works Cited

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