

Making the Case: Senior Pet Care Protocols

A Commitment To Compliance Article



A campaign sponsored through the cooperative efforts of Merial, MWI and AAHA MARKETLink.

“Features are services rendered and their effects; for example, dental prophylaxis result in clean teeth. Benefits are the good that accrues from the effects. Benefits of dental prophylaxis include healthier gums, better breath, less tooth pain, and the avoided risk of heart disease. Features are the *what* of compliance. Benefits are the *why*. To enlist client support, focus on the *why*.”¹

As the available technology and advancements in veterinary medicine continue to grow, it's easy for the science-minded among us to get caught up in the whiz-bang of it all. Telling clients what we can do and how it works excites us, but it may not be all that convincing to clients, especially those with senior pets at home who likely fear any “bad” news marks the beginning of the end for their long-loved canine or feline companion. It's a phenomenon known as “preemptive grieving.”

A common flaw in client education stems from focusing too much on what a particular test or treatment involves and not enough on why it is of benefit to the pet and to the client.

Admittedly, it can be a tougher sell when aging pets seem just fine. Clients like to think of their pets as still being very puppy-like or kitten-like. And, when the middle-aged or senior dog or cat shows no outward signs of illness or decline, many clients are reluctant to go looking for trouble.

That's when it's best to remember and convey to them that “The purposes of clinical screening of healthy pets are to establish a baseline assessment for future comparison and to detect subclinical abnormalities at a time when preventive and therapeutic intervention may have the most benefit.”²

While increased monitoring and diagnostics for older pets indeed seek to find any problems early, the flipside of senior care efforts is that we're looking to confirm that pets are indeed healthy, and to keep them that way. There is no greater present for a pet's birthday than knowing for sure he or she remains vibrant and strong.

Rex Riggs, DVM, from Best Friends Veterinary Hospital in Powell, Ohio, also serves on the board of advisors for Embrace Pet Insurance. He agrees that “she seems fine” is one of the top objections to more intense senior pet screening. His team combats this perception by explaining that:

- Prevention is better than treatment.
- Early treatment is better than a later crisis.

“We often use kidney disease as an example, explaining how more than half of kidney function is already permanently lost by the time a pet begins to show symptoms,” Riggs says.

The Best Friends team also compares the recommendation for more senior testing to the way a person's exams with their physicians often change when they reach 30, 40, or 50 years of age.

Even if clients don't agree during their initial appointment, Riggs always sends home educational materials. “Even if they don't end up testing,” he says, “it contributes to the perception that wellness testing is a regular part of the senior exam.”

Senior Care Basics

When the American Animal Hospital Association released its Senior Care Guidelines for Dogs and Cats in 2005, the document outlined, among other things, protocols that address the specific needs of aging pets. This includes:

- More frequent and more comprehensive physical exams
- Exhaustive history taking
- Creation of a laboratory database (blood work, urinalysis, fecals, heart tests, etc.)
- Increased watchfulness for signs of common diseases, including cancers
- Pre-anesthesia testing
- Dedicated client education, spanning everything from diet and weight to activity level and housetraining habits

Case Studies

To explore how some veterinary teams develop, recommend, and explain their senior care protocols, we asked three practices for some insights into their efforts and talking points.

Case Study: Humane Society of Boulder Valley

Jennifer Bolser, DVM, works as the chief clinic veterinarian at the hospital inside a progressive humane society in Boulder, Colorado, a city that is famous for changing the language in its pet ordinance from “pet owners” to “pet guardians.”

The hospital's five doctors and 19 staff members serve a diverse community of 13,000 active patients, in addition to their efforts on behalf of animals in the attached shelter.

Their “Senior at Seven” campaign includes:

- Semi-annual physical exams
- Annual full senior blood work (CBC, chemistry profile, thyroid level, heartworm)
- Urinalysis
- Fecal analysis

“For cats, understanding and testing for Feline Leukemia Virus and Feline Immunodeficiency Virus is important,” Bolser says. “Then, depending upon abnormalities detected on physical examination, we may recommend additional diagnostics.”

Those follow-up tests might include:

- X-rays
- ECG
- Needle aspiration of masses
- Ultrasound

She adds that dental care, including X-rays, and ideal body condition scores get plenty of focus throughout a pet's life, but are especially important for senior pets.

Bolser explains that it's harder to calculate senior care compliance as a whole because the levels of agreement vary between the elements recommended. Exams and vaccines hover around 90%, but blood work is more like 60-75%. Advanced diagnostics hit around 20%.

When the Boulder Humane team talks to clients about why senior care matters, they focus on how early detection allows for earlier action and intervention, which in turn prevents small illnesses or the beginning stages of big illnesses from turning into painful, dangerous, or even life-threatening emergencies for pets. Often preventives and treatments done now make more invasive (and expensive) veterinary care less likely to be needed later.

Here are a few examples of their client education talking points:

Physical examinations are by far the most important preventive care veterinarians provide. These exams detect problems before they cause untreatable complications. Examples include:

- Finding and monitoring heart murmurs
- Removing and/or testing skin masses, which can be a common place for pet cancers to start
- Treating or removing damaged or infected teeth before painful abscesses form or other body functions are affected by oral bacteria
- Monitoring weight as a key indicator of overall health or health changes

Blood work screenings reveal changes in organ function that can't always be detected upon exam. This includes kidney problems (common in older pets, especially cats), anemia (which can indicate an illness is afoot), and thyroid issues (because older dogs tend to lose thyroid function, while older cats tend to have overactive thyroid function).

Heartworm is the "silent killer." Regular blood tests and consistent use of preventives help pets avoid this deadly parasite.

Urinalysis finds unnoticed urinary tract infections, kidney problems, and signs of undiagnosed diabetes—all of which can cause life-threatening emergencies if left untreated.

X-rays and ultrasound imaging give veterinarians much-needed views of body structures (bones, organs, etc.) that they may not be able to feel with their hands on examination. This includes tumors or enlarged organs, heart failure, lung disease, bladder and/or kidney stones.

Bolser tells us that "cost" is by far the most common objection, especially in recent economic times. The Boulder Humane team will scale back to the most vital tests based on concerns after exam, but they also offer "pre-procedure layaway plans" for clients who want to bank payments for future procedures their pets will need.

Case Study: Avenue of the Saints Animal Hospital

Annette Wood, a veterinary technician at the one-doctor AAHA-accredited Avenue of the Saints Animal Hospital in Charles City, Iowa, explains that clients of senior-aged pets complete a detailed "Celebrate Seniors" form (provided by IDEXX) as part of a routine physical for pets older than 7 years.

In the 10,000-member community, Avenue of the Saints serves about 1,200 active clients. The team finds that this form opens the doors to conversations about many relevant topics, including:

- Pet behavior and interaction with the family
- Movement problems, including jumping, standing up, etc.
- Any changes in housetraining habits
- Diet and eating habits
- Weight and body condition scores
- Activity levels

Because possible arthritis issues and treatment options often arise in a senior pet exam, that gives the team a chance to discuss senior blood work, including a general health panel, CBC, electrolytes, thyroid (T4) and NSAID-related panel (if needed).

Dental prophylaxis typically come up at these appointments as well, so the team tries to get those scheduled within 6 weeks of the comprehensive exam and blood work.

Because a senior pet can come out of an exam with a written report that makes 10-20 different recommendations, Wood is a self-proclaimed "brochure hog" who orders, stocks, and hands out brochures on various recommendations like crazy. "It lets people learn and do some soul searching on their own living room couch," she says.

To transition from what needs to be done to why it's necessary, the Avenue of the Saints team talks about how being proactive throughout a pet's life, but especially as pets reach their senior years, provides a certain level of assurance that anything doctors find can be dealt with now, rather than when it reaches an unexpected crisis—which can be scary and expensive, and could potentially put tough decisions on a shorter timetable.

And, yet, clients fear anesthesia for older pets, even though Wood points out that most of the pets getting in-depth dentals are either senior or geriatric already. To ease worries, the team explains how tests, including blood work, give doctors a clearer picture of a pet's current health, which provides a measure of safety going into an anesthetic episode.

Wood says that the other big objections come from people who don't even want to try introducing new, preventive routines into the lives of older, set-in-their-ways pets. Brushing an older pet's teeth following a required dental procedure is one example.

Case Study: Acacia Animal Health Center

Myra Herbert-McHenry, RVT, is the client education team leader at AAHA-accredited Acacia Animal Health Center in Escondido, California, which is 30 miles outside of San Diego. The center has

Take the Challenge

1. Form a senior care team to review, revise, or develop your senior care standards and protocols. These teams typically include a veterinarian, a technician, a receptionist, and a member of the hospital's administration. A good place to start is by comparing what you already do to the AAHA Senior Care Guidelines for Dogs and Cats.

2. Audit your current senior care compliance and set goals for improvement for each element in your senior care program.

3. Invite a cross-section of senior pet-owning clients to provide feedback on their wants/needs, concerns, and expectations, or send birthday cards to senior pets that include a few senior care key messages.



five doctors, a staff of 40, and an active patient load in the multiple thousands. They use a senior care plan that includes:

- Semi-annual exams
- Full blood panel, including liver, kidney, and thyroid functions
- Heartworm tests (for both dogs and cats)
- Viral tests for cats
- Lyme and other tick-borne disease tests for dogs
- Urinalysis
- Fecal tests

“That’s our general senior package,” Herbert-McHenry says. “Then, at least once a year, we like to have full-body X-rays done on our senior pets as well. It’s something that people usually choose to do every year or every 3 years, but it’s something we recommend.”

She explains the team is looking for:

- Lung masses
- Any changes in the gastrointestinal tract
- Any lumps, bumps, or tumors that might be in the abdomen (because those don’t consistently show up in blood work)
- Cancers (especially those not affecting a specific organ, which don’t show up easily in blood work)

If they find anything of concern, follow-up tests might include ultrasounds or other more advanced diagnostics, such as MRI.

Acacia Animal Health Center staffs a large client education department, but Herbert-McHenry says, “Our entire staff is educated. Period. Our entire staff is trained to what specific signs are, what specific recommendations are. If you stutter on something, if they ask, ‘Why do you do this?’ And, you go, ‘Well, it’s because, um...,’ they are not going to do it because they don’t believe you, almost.”

“Everybody knows why, but if you, for some reason stumble over your words in front of a client,” she adds, “then they can think ‘What are they doing here?’ It’s not about the money. It’s never been about the money. It’s about the wellness of pets, so even though some of the tests tend to be a little more expensive, they are so valuable in the long run.”



To avoid any client education slip-ups, even just a verbal bobble, the team uses role-playing in scenarios that range from clients who easily agree to everything they suggest to those who challenge their every recommendation.

In addition to website content that explains why the hospital recommends certain things as well as follow-up e-mails and phone calls, Acacia’s team sends home many client handouts.

“We also talk about cases we’ve had in the past, like the dog who came in bounding around, who seemed totally fine, but when we took an X-ray, we found a giant mass. We did surgery before there were any symptoms, and we’ve taken care of a problem that probably would have killed that dog,” she says.

It’s important for clients to understand that much of what can go wrong with pets cannot be seen externally, with your eyes or your hands, or even from the descriptions they provide about a pet’s behavior or health status.

To bolster their case for senior care and promote the quality of life that it brings, the team also stresses the fact that patients simply cannot speak for themselves and these tests and other recommendations help the pet’s body tell its story. “They cannot speak to us, so we have to try and speak for them, and the only way we can do that is by doing these things,” Herbert-McHenry says.

The team also explains just how much pet animals instinctually hide illness or injury. Good examples are the pet with a huge slab fracture in a tooth that continues eating or the dog with the badly torn toenail that limped at home, but bounded into the veterinary hospital. “Pets are still animals, and they have that instinct that ‘if I act sick or I look sick, then something is going to come and eat me,’” she tells clients.

Reframe Your Explanations

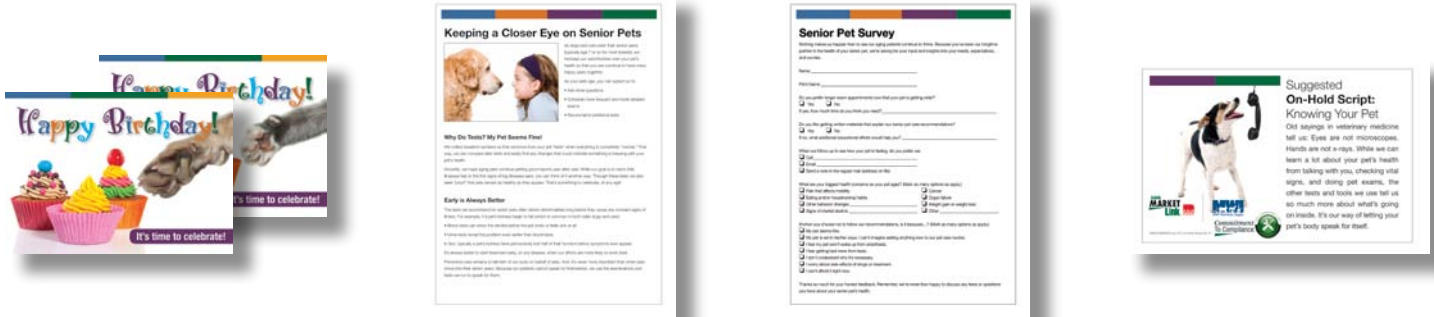
So, as you begin to retool your explanations to focus more on why and less on what, consider reframing your words to include:

- How comforting it is to confirm an aging pet is indeed healthy (if nothing is found)
- How many diseases are already well underway before any symptoms show up
- How taking action now helps pets avoid painful, dangerous, and even life-threatening emergencies
- How preventive care and increased veterinary attention in the senior years, especially, improve a pet’s quality of life
- How practicing keen vigilance gives everyone time to make important healthcare decisions before things reach a crisis point

References

- ¹Six Steps to Higher-Quality Patient Care (AAHA, 2009), page 19.
- ²AAHA Senior Care Guidelines for Dogs and Cats, J Am Anim Hosp Assoc 2005;41:81-91.

The Role of Retailing in Compliance: Compliance Resources from AAHA MARKETLink



From Happy Birthday Postcards to on-hold scripts, newsletter inserts and questionnaires, there are many ways to prepare your clients for what to expect from, and be on the lookout for, in their aging pet. Download these information tools from www.AAHAMARKETLink.com or adapt to fit your own needs.

The Role of Retailing in Compliance: Compliance Resources from AAHA

Pet Health Brochures

- Laboratory Testing for Your Pet
- Your Aging Pet
- Your Pet's Dental Care



Educate your clients about common animal health concerns with these handy brochures that have been reviewed by an ABVP board-certified veterinarian. These brochures come in packs of 50 and can help you improve compliance for as little as \$.17 each! Give clients the information they need in a convenient question-and-answer format. Each brochure describes the background of the health issue and includes information about physical signs, diagnosis, treatment and prevention.

Members: \$9.95 each pack Nonmembers: \$13.95 each pack

Dental Compliance (on CD-ROM)

Authored by Dr. Robin Downing, this product is an engaging, interactive training CD that helps your team understand dental compliance issues and how they impact pet wellness, the management of related disease processes and the fiscal/economic well being of the practice.

The program contains fully narrated, case-based video scenarios and interactive exercises – for the whole practice team to SEE, HEAR and FEEL the impact of clearly and consistently communicating the specific dental recommendations to the client – as the client interacts with the veterinarian, technician and frontline staff.



Members: \$88.95 each Nonmembers: \$98.95 each

Compliance: Taking Quality Care to the Next Level and Six Steps to Higher-Quality Patient Care (Set)

Following the publication AAHA's The Path to High Quality Care, compliance became a focus for much of the profession. As emphasis on compliance continues to grow, important questions remained:

- **What measurable improvements, if any, have been achieved?**
- **What works to improve compliance and, conversely, what stands in its way?**
- **What level of investment is required for an effective and sustainable compliance-improvement program?**



AAHA and Pfizer Animal Health sought to find answers to these and other questions. The results of the 2009 AAHA Compliance Follow-Up Study are detailed in *Compliance: Taking Quality Care to the Next Level*.

A companion guide, *Six Steps to Higher Quality Patient Care*, provides tools for the members of your team to learn effective habits and protocols necessary to boost compliance in your practice. By following these steps, any practice can implement a successful compliance program and help ensure that your patients receive superior care.

The set includes one copy of *Compliance* and three copies of *Six Steps*.

Members: \$24.95 Nonmembers: \$29.95

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