

Charging for remote consultation

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Abstract

Remote consultation in veterinary practice is an evolving service that allows veterinarians to provide professional advice, diagnosis, and treatment recommendations without being physically present. Despite its increasing prevalence, many veterinary professionals struggle with structuring fees for these services and effectively communicating their value to clients, as well as believing their value within. This paper explores the economic worth of veterinary expertise, the necessity of structured consultation fees, and strategies for client communication to ensure professional sustainability while maintaining trust, satisfaction and prioritizing animal health.

Introduction

Veterinary professionals frequently provide remote consultation services through various means, including email, text, phone calls, video reviews, and data analysis. However, these services are often unrecognized and uncompensated. The global veterinary telehealth market is valued at \$306.72 million as of 2024, highlighting the financial potential of structured remote consultation. As the demand for these services continues to grow, it is crucial for veterinarians to redefine remote consultation in a way that enhances both professional respect, increased value to clients and economic sustainability.

Defining Remote Consultation

Remote consultation encompasses any professional guidance provided without physical presence. This includes reviewing feed rations, analyzing genetic pairings, developing vaccination protocols, and assisting clients with herd management decisions. In recent years, technology has expanded the scope of remote veterinary services, enabling video-based evaluations, virtual biosecurity assessments, and real-time emergency guidance. The shift from performing hands-on procedures to advising clients remotely underscores the intellectual and diagnostic contributions of veterinary professionals. This shift off the farm as a result of technology, has decreased billable hours as off-site consultation and telemedicine is not something historically utilized in veterinary practice. While traditionally undervalued, this advisory role carries significant importance and must be appropriately recognized and compensated.

Understanding the Value of Veterinary Expertise

The worth of veterinary expertise is determined by both market demand and professional self-perception. Many veterinarians provide informal advice free of charge, unaware of the cumulative impact of uncompensated time. For instance, spending ten minutes on just four different calls per day adds up to over 170 hours annually—time that could otherwise contribute to professional fee revenue. Additionally, free services are often subconsciously devalued by clients, leading to affective devaluation and reduced perceived worth. Unlike casual opinions, veterinary recommendations carry legal, ethical, and medical implications, which in turn carry additional risk for the practitioner. Risk that must be compensated for assuming. Understanding the gravity of these implications reinforces the necessity of structured consultation fees.

Structuring Consultation Fees

To establish a sustainable pricing model, veterinarians must first assess the nature and complexity of remote consultations. Simple case assessments, such as reviewing herd nutrition plans or advising on vaccine protocols, may be charged on an hourly basis. More in-depth consultations, such as virtual training, legal or insurance-related cases, and ongoing case management, may warrant structured flat fees or retainers. Implementing membership-based services or priority-access programs can also provide clients with ongoing consultation opportunities while ensuring predictable revenue streams for veterinarians. By formalizing consultation pricing, veterinarians establish clear boundaries and reinforce the professional value of their time and expertise.

To Charge or Not to Charge

Determining whether to charge for a consultation requires careful consideration of the nature of the inquiry, as this is an unfortunate gray area of the profession. If a client is simply seeking clarification of previous advice, it may not necessitate a fee. However, if responding requires reviewing records, analyzing images, videos, lab results, or treatment plans, then a charge is warranted. Inquiries involving herd-wide health planning, outbreak management, or significant scheduled time should also be billed appropriately. Additionally, if the inquiry generates a medical record, or if it is a repeat inquiry that the client has already had a courtesy consultation about, it is a strong indicator that a formal consultation fee should be applied. Establishing these criteria helps veterinarians navigate billing decisions while maintaining fairness and transparency with clients.

Client Communication Strategies

Effectively presenting consultation fees requires a shift in communication. Instead of stating, "I have to charge for this service," veterinarians should highlight the benefits to the client: "For \$X.XX, you'll receive a personalized assessment ensuring the best decision for your animals." Framing remote consultations as an advantage rather than a compromise can further enhance clients' perceived value of the service. Rather than positioning remote consults as secondary to in-person visits, veterinarians can emphasize the efficiency and cost savings they offer. For instance, rather than saying, "Since I can't be there, we can do a remote consult," a more effective approach would be, "The quickest way to address this issue is to schedule a consultation where we analyze records and images together." Consultations held remotely can also increase a veterinarians availability, resulting in faster interventions and more favorable case outcomes and well as lowering costs for clients, as early intervention frequently costs much less than delaying treatment.

As with any service shift, veterinarians should anticipate and address client objections. Focusing the conversation on highlighting the value brought to the client rather than defending the justification of the service will lead to much more favorable outcomes and increased customer satisfaction. A common client concern may be, "I've never had to pay for this before."

Acknowledging the historical precedent of informal consultations while explaining the increasing demand for veterinary time can help ease resistance. Another objection is, "But it only takes a few minutes!" This perception undervalues the years of training, experience, and liability associated with professional veterinary advice. Reinforcing that even brief recommendations can have a significant impact on herd health, and be the fastest way to implement therapy can help convey the value of the service.

Ensuring Transparency and Trust

Clients should never be surprised by consultation fees. Establishing a clear, upfront fee agreement improves trust and fairness perception. A comprehensive service agreement should outline several crucial aspects of a service contract. The scope of services should be defined to establish what clients should expect from their veterinarian in a consultation capacity.

Consultation charges, including hourly fees, retainer costs or telehealth fees should be clearly outlined and agreed upon up front. Data exchange protocols should be established, as clients also hold responsibility in the timely provision of data and other information to be used in analysis by the consulting veterinarian. Finally, billing procedures, and provider availability should be discussed so there is clear expectation prior to ensuring an agreement. Clearly defining these terms prevents confusion, enhances professional credibility, and ensures that veterinary professionals are fairly compensated for their expertise.

Conclusion

Remote consultation is an essential and valuable service in large animal veterinary practice. To ensure sustainability, veterinarians must recognize the worth of their expertise, structure appropriate fees, and effectively communicate this value to clients. By implementing transparent pricing models and strategic client agreements, veterinarians can enhance professional respect, financial stability, and client trust. This proactive approach not only benefits individual practitioners but also strengthens animal health and welfare as a whole by redefining remote consultation as a legitimate and indispensable service.

Resources

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