Digital Radiography: Today’s Standard of Dental Care

More veterinarians understand the need to deliver good dental care. But, are they following through with the right technology?

By Laura Thill

Digital radiography is changing the face of veterinary oral care, according to experts. Yet, it appears there’s room for improvement. “The standard of care in veterinary practice today is to incorporate dental radiography into every professional dental treatment,” says Daniel T. Carmichael, DVM, FAVD, Diplomate AVDC. Digital radiography has, for the most part, replaced film-based technology, he adds. However, while both the American Veterinary Dental College (AVDC) and the American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA) have identified dental X-rays as a necessary part of a professional dental treatment, many practices have yet to adopt digital radiography, he points out.

“I would estimate that the majority of veterinary practices have not yet adopted dental radiography into their practices,” Carmichael says, noting that this goes for some of the large corporate entities as well. “Not only are these practices delivering sub-standard dental care, but they are also missing out on a profitable source of practice income. Many practice management experts have identified dental radiography as one of the most profitable investments a veterinary practice can make, with a rapid return on investment.” He estimates it takes less than 6-12 months to recoup costs.

Veterinary dental specialist Brett Beckman, DVM, FAVD, DAVDC, DAAPM, agrees that digital radiography has become a standard of care for veterinary dental care. The technology enables veterinarians to diagnose periodontal disease much more thoroughly, he points out. But, he, too, sees a gap between the availability of digital radiography and the number of veterinarians who have adopted the technology for dental care.
On one hand, more veterinarians today are taking courses in dental extractions, he points out. “We are getting to the point where more veterinarians understand that the majority of their work includes surgical extractions, which [requires] digital radiography,” he says. The problem, he adds, is that some veterinarians have the technology, but haven’t taken courses in surgical extraction. Or, some veterinarians are trained to perform surgical extractions, but have yet to add digital radiography.

Beckman, who provides veterinary dental webinars, courses, continuing education and lectures, notes that veterinarians interested in providing oral healthcare (e.g., such as those attending his courses and lectures) are getting on board with digital radiography. Whereas about 10 percent of veterinarians attending his lectures/courses had the technology 10 years ago, roughly 60-70 percent do today.

The cost of doing business
With increasingly advanced technology comes a cost, and one might wonder how much veterinarians are willing to pay for equipment, such as digital radiography, as well as how much their clients are willing to pay for the service. While the cost of digital radiography has been relatively stable over the last several years, the fact is, it can cost as much as $10,000 or $12,000 for a practice to add it (including the software and a generator). “But, this is the only investment in general veterinary medicine that, if used properly, has the greatest return on investment,” says Beckman. “Even if a veterinarian doesn’t charge for the actual X-rays, [he or she] can pay for the unit in six months, simply by doing procedures that are based on digital radiography/images.” It may cost a practice not to add digital radiography, he adds, noting that having the technology enables the practice to provide better patient care, which in turn leads to increased client trust and greater revenue.

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“Sure, new technology comes with a price tag, but in the dental world it is not prohibitive.”

Not only that, periodontal disease can adversely impact an animal’s overall health, he continues. “It is well known that the consequences of periodontal disease go way past bad breath,” he says, noting that it can cause painful oral infections and the spread of bacteria to vital body organs. “It is also known that the best treatment for periodontal disease is prevention,” he adds. A client’s investment in preventive care helps ensure a healthier life for his or her pet, as well as helps avoid more costly treatments down the road, he points out. “As veterinarians, we are obligated to offer the very best in care, and charge what we need to cover the costs and make a fair profit.”

But, no matter how well intentioned clients are, their decisions often depend on how much they can afford. “The ability of pet-owners to afford proper dental care ranges and is based on economics,” says Carmichael. Pet insurance doesn’t always cover the full cost of advanced dental procedures, he points out. And, when clients can afford dental care for their pets, they likely won’t do so if they aren’t properly educated on “the benefits of the investment,” he notes.

“Eighty percent of the practice base of a general veterinary practice won’t be able to afford the cost of the procedure,” says Beckman. That said, 20 percent of clients likely can afford high-end services and will follow through on their veterinarian’s recommendations, he points out.

“We need to keep in mind that nearly every patient the veterinarian examines will have something wrong with its mouth – usually periodontal disease,” Beckman.
continues. “If 80-90 percent of patients have periodontal disease, veterinarians should be talking to all clients about oral care and prevention, knowing that roughly 20 percent will follow through. Distributor sales reps should remind their customers that this 20 percent of clients [account for] 80 percent of the revenue for the practice. These clients are the consumers of any high-end service that the practice offers.”

**Working with customers**

When distributor sales reps are educated about dental technology and products, they can better service their veterinarian customers – particularly those who resist change in the industry. “There are many innovations in the veterinary dental market,” says Carmichael. “Some are true innovations and others do not stand up to the test of scientific scrutiny.” When veterinarians don’t trust new technology, they might be reluctant to adopt it, he explains. “The key is [for sales reps] to be able to sort out for the veterinarian what new technologies are true breakthroughs vs. [those] that may not be effective.”

In Beckman’s experience, one of veterinarians’ biggest complaints is that no one teaches them how to use digital radiography. Sales reps not only should be aware of – and knowledgeable about – the products they carry, but they should be able to make recommendations for training, he notes. He recommends sales reps approach their customers with several probing questions, such as the following:

- “Doctor, does your practice have digital radiography?”
- “If so, are you taking digital dental radiographs, including full-mouth X-rays?”
- “Are you aware that digital radiography is a standard of care – one that ensures better patient care and additional revenue for your practice?”

In addition, reps should offer their customers a copy of the AAHA dental guidelines.

“Adding digital radiography is an investment,” he says. “Veterinarians need the equipment and training, as well as technicians to run the digital equipment. It’s the reps’ job to help [their customers] determine what they need to do to set up – what lectures and seminars [to attend], and what training and education they require.

“This is an investment for sales reps as well,” Beckman continues. They too must attend lectures and seminars in order to understand how the equipment works and direct their customers to the right educational sources, he explains. Particularly as more distributors are helping their veterinarian customers add digital radiography, sales reps must be smarter when it comes to offering this service, he adds.

“If veterinarians know what they should be doing to provide proper dental care, and they are offering these services with enough enthusiasm, there will be a steady market and a high demand for service,” says Carmichael. “An educated sales force that can be trusted to provide advice on the necessary tools and products, and that can deliver them, will do well,” he adds.