

Calling all Cats

It's well known that pet owners don't bring their cats to their veterinarians as often as dogs. It's a trend that has been documented, and it predates the economic downturn that began in 2008. What can be done about it?

Plenty.

It won't be easy, but the veterinary profession is working on it. Chances are, distributor sales reps will find themselves enlisted in the effort.

Decline in visits has slowed

The bad news? Feline visit volume and veterinary revenues remain depressed, according to the recently released Bayer Veterinary Care Usage Study III: Feline Findings.

But there's good news too. First, the decline in visits has slowed down. Second, there's significant available capacity among veterinary practices to see more cats. And third, veterinary professionals are increasingly recognizing the cat opportunity.

Yes, the good intentions are there, according to the study. But stronger follow-up – and resolve – is needed on the part of the veterinary community to seize that opportunity.

“Earlier phases of the [Bayer Veterinary Care Usage] study identified the fact that a large number of cats receive inadequate veterinary care, and that better care for cats could present an important revenue source for practices,” says Jim Thomas, Ph.D., senior manager, market intelligence and research, Bayer Healthcare LLC Animal Health Division. Earlier studies included recommendations for veterinarians to make their practices more cat-friendly, and Bayer felt it was time to re-examine how veterinarians were responding to those recommendations. “We saw an opportunity to collect additional data to help the veterinary community identify why cats are being underserved and how we can change this.” The American

There's plenty of work to be done to improve cat health

Association of Feline Practitioners was a “logical partner” to help Bayer investigate the matter further.

Why the decline?

“Feline resistance” is a major factor contributing to the relative paucity of cat visits to the vet, according to earlier Bayer studies. Two key friction points for cat owners, according to the earlier studies, were preparing the cat to go to the vet and then arriving at the clinic. A

significant percentage of cat owners told researchers that even thinking about taking their cat to the vet is stressful.

Other factors are at play, says Thomas. “For the most part, cats are accidental acquisitions.” Some come from shelters and breeders, but the majority are accidental. Consequently, new cat owners get little to no instruction on how to care for their new pet. Few shelters have formal policies and procedures on recommending veterinary care to new owners.

AAFP President Roy Smith, DVM, of Central Texas Cat Hospital, Round Rock, Texas, points out how advances in medicine

may, ironically, have led to fewer cat visits in recent years. “Since the beginning of veterinary medicine, one thing that brought people in [to the vet] were annual vaccinations,” he points out. Given today's longer-lasting vaccines, many cat owners have figured out their pets don't need the annual visit in order to get vaccinated. The veterinary community's mistake was emphasizing the vaccination, not the fact that cats need annual physicals, he says. “As a result, [cat owners] are missing the point.” Some re-education needs to take place.

Health risks

By failing to bring their pets in for annual checkups, cat owners subject their pets to several risks, continues Smith. “If you're not properly immunizing cats, they are exposed to respiratory

KEY POINTS

AAFP President Roy Smith says advances in medicine may, ironically, have led to fewer cat visits in recent years. Vaccines are longer-lasting, and many cat owners have probably thought their pets don't need an annual visit. Some re-education needs to take place.

Cats hide their problems well, experts say. Owners will often have a hard time picking up on potential trouble, which makes the preventive checkup that much more important.

People don't enjoy visiting the dentist, but they realize the importance. The same emphasis on value needs to take place in feline health.

viruses, leukemia, that type of thing,” he says. Renal disease is a common problem, particularly in older cats. Cats are also subject to cancer, inflammatory bowel disease, hyperthyroidism and dental disease. “These are all things we can do something about if we catch them early,” he says.

“Cats hide everything; they’re survivors,” says Smith. “They have learned to hide their illness.” More often than not, owners won’t pick up on potential trouble. That’s why it’s important to get the animal in for annual checkups – semiannual checkups for those older than 10 years of age.

“Cats are terrific at hiding symptoms,” says Elizabeth Colleran, DVM, DABVP, Chico (Calif.) Hospital for Cats. “Early disease detection and prevention of chronic pain, such as oral pain, is crucial for preventing suffering and unnecessary early mortality. The message is, veterinarians are trained to see things that cat owners – as much as they love their cats – might miss.

“And there’s the whole notion of exposure to communicable diseases,” continues Colleran, who is a past president of AAFP and the spokeswoman for the AAFP’s Cat-Friendly Practice initiative. “We have a responsibility to our cats, family members and the community to prevent communicable disease, including parasite prevention.” Outdoor cats have a higher risk of exposure to community diseases, many of which are preventable by vaccination and parasite protection.

An ongoing relationship between the cat, owner and veterinary professional allows for an analysis of the cat’s lifestyle, nutrition, behavior, origin and history, all of which are critical for intelligent disease prevention, says Colleran. “Some very commonly unrecognized and preventable or manageable conditions left untreated result in a poor quality of life, at best. These conditions usually manifest slowly and result in incremental decline, which often goes unnoticed by families who are busy with their lives or who miss symptoms such as slow weight loss, an increase or decrease in calorie consumption, or changes in activity, that we know as the early signs.”

What’s more, absent regular visits, veterinarians lose the opportunity to educate clients about proper care for their pets, says Colleran. “Cat owners need to be educated on a variety of subjects depending on the health and lifestyle of their cat, [including] the need for routine veterinary visits, the importance of vaccination, nutritional needs, parasite prevention, subtle signs of sickness, behavior changes, senior care needs and how environmental enrichment can help overweight cats and improve their quality of life.”

Opportunity for improvement

Veterinarians can do many things to make their practices more cat-friendly, and hence, increase cat visits, according

What veterinarians can do now to increase cat visits

1. Find the un-served/under-served cats in your practice by asking about other household pets on every visit, and track reminder compliance.
2. Educate cat owners on carrier use and how to transport their cats.
3. Make your waiting room as cat-welcoming as possible by establishing separate areas for dogs and cats and installing visual barriers, if possible.
4. Reserve one or more exam rooms for cats only.
5. Train all staff regularly in cat-friendly handling procedures.
6. Review and refine feline exam protocols regularly.
7. Talk through the exam with cat owners.
8. Use and dispense feline-friendly medications.
9. Send home an exam report every time.
10. Schedule the next exam before the cat leaves the practice.

Source: Bayer Veterinary Care Usage Study III: Feline Findings, © 2012 Bayer HealthCare

to experts. Not to be overlooked is one very simple one – communicating better with cat owners.

Few people enjoy going to the dentist, points out Cristiano von Simson, DVM, MBA, director of veterinary technical services, Bayer HealthCare LLC Animal Health Division. “Why do we go?” he asks. “Because we understand the value. So Step 1 for the veterinarian is to communicate the value [of regular visits] to the cat owner. Most owners don’t know that, and veterinarians don’t communicate it as well as they could.”

“I’ve never met a veterinarian who didn’t have the highest compassion and respect for the animal they’re treating,” says Thomas. But in their zeal to do their very best for their patients, veterinarians can sometimes neglect to keep the owner in touch with the process. “There is opportunity for improvement,” he says. The cat and owner benefit when the veterinary staff is more sensitive to their needs. For example, making a point to invite the owner into the exam room with his or her cat is better for both, he says.

Staff members should be trained on appropriate handling, assessing behaviors and feline-friendly examination and procedure strategies, says the AAFP. They should

make a point, for example, to offer tips to owners about how to make a visit to the vet less stressful for cat and owner. By doing so, owners are more willing to return for future visits, and they feel the practice is truly invested in the welfare of their cats.

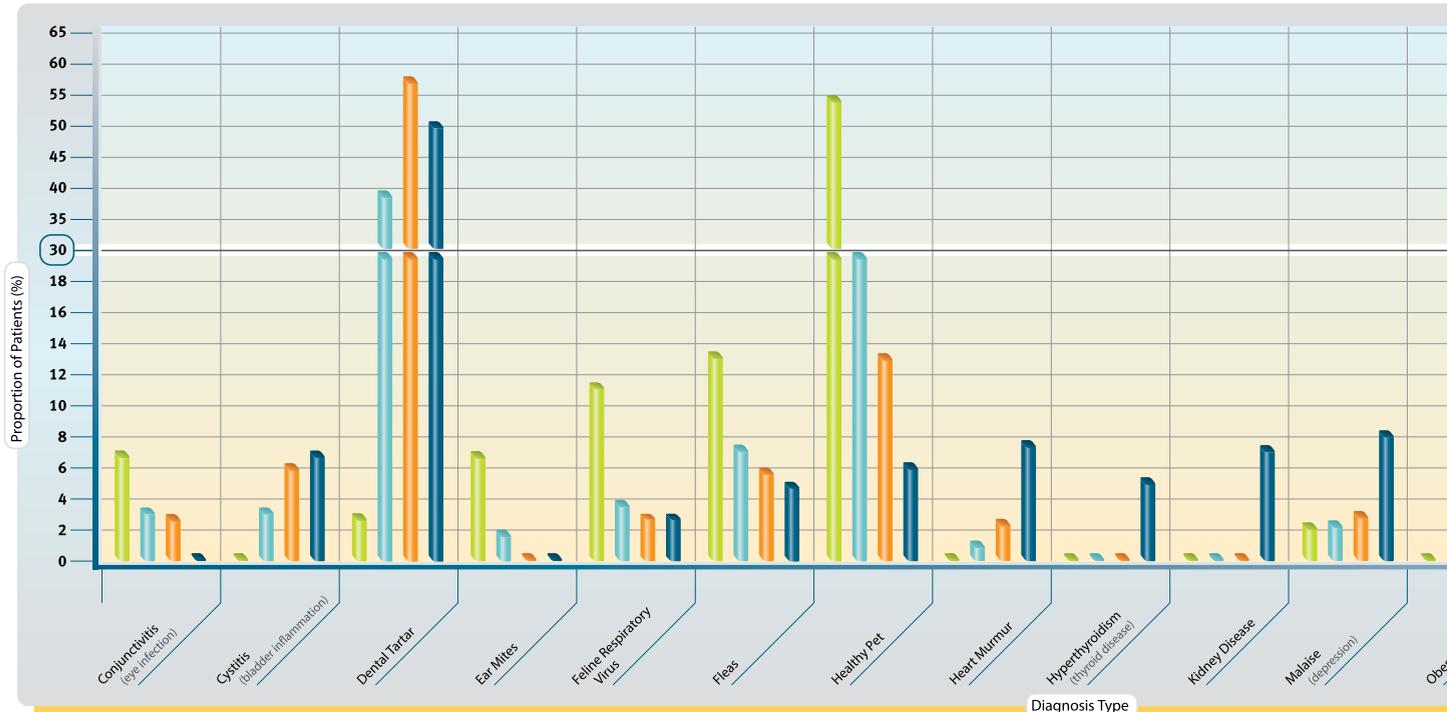
“One thing we need to recognize is that every time a client comes in with their cat and children, it’s a teaching moment,” points out Colleran. “We want to make sure the entire family stays healthy. If we look at [the regular cat visit] as a family health issue, we can make a case to keep everyone’s medical visits up to date.”

A trusting relationship with the client is the foundation of good medicine, she says. “If they believe we have something to offer them because we speak to them openly and honestly, once we get them, we don’t lose them. It’s that first visit, when it’s unpleasant and doesn’t seem to be a valuable experience, when we lose them.

“We need to train our staff to reinforce the concepts we talked about – preventive care, subtle signs of illness, community health. Then in the exam room, we need to talk about what we’re doing, so clients can see the value.

Most Common Diagnoses 2011 | Cat

Source: Banfield State of Pet Health 2012



These diagnoses are a compilation of the most common diagnoses found in cats throughout the year. While “Healthy Pet” is not a true medical diagnosis, it is important to include, as it reinforces that pet owners should bring their pets to the veterinarian for preventive care, as well as when their pets are sick or injured. Reasons for a “Healthy Pet” visit include physical examinations, routine vaccinations and blood work or nutritional counseling, among other reasons.



“When it comes down to it, it’s [the veterinarian and his or her staff] in relationship with another human being. If we use that as the foundation, [clients] believe we have their best interest – and the best interests of their cat – at heart.”

Empathy

Sensitivity to the needs of the cat is key to a successful vet/patient/client relationship. Veterinarians are eager to practice the best medicine and prescribe the best products, says von Simson. “But for some, it’s new to ask, ‘How is the cat feeling about the experience?’” For example, does the clinic have a cat-only waiting area? If so, the visit is likely to be less stressful for cat and owner.

Indeed, for many cat owners, the process of taking their cat out of their home to the veterinarian defines what it means to be a cat owner, says Thomas. “It can be incredibly painful, and they’ll anything to avoid it.”

Colleran speaks about the anxious minutes the owner spends chasing his or her cat around the house and then forcing it into the carrier for the trip in the car. “That’s stressful for the owner, and think about the poor animal’s stress level before we even get them in the door,” she says.

Oral healthcare and cats

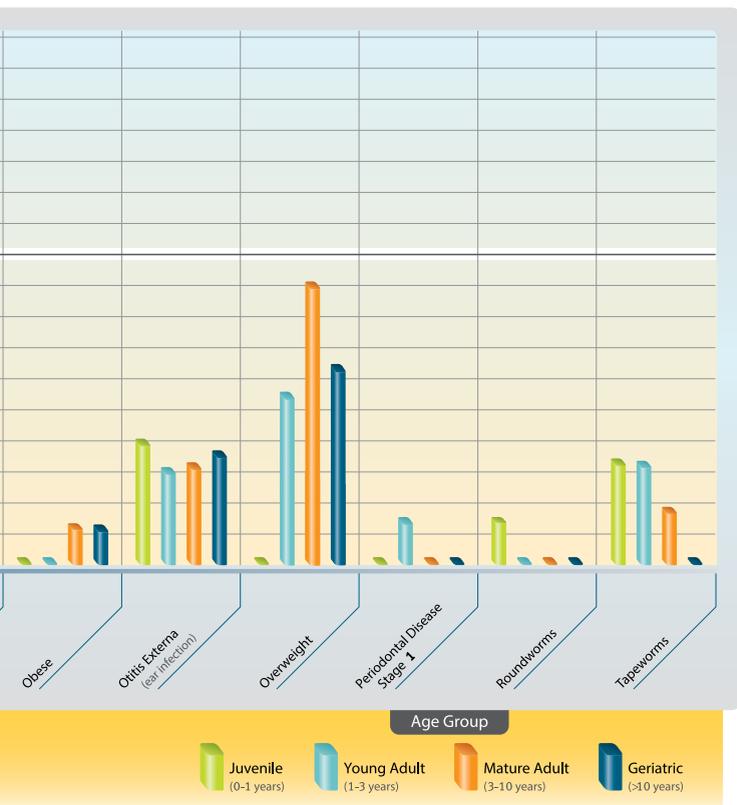
Oral disease is one of the most prevalent diseases in cats, points out Cindy Charlier, DVM, DAVDC, Fox Valley Veterinary Dentistry & Surgery, St. Charles, Ill., and a scheduled speaker at the upcoming American Association of Feline Practitioners Conference, Sept. 26-29, 2013, in Dallas, Texas. According to the American Veterinary Dental Society, 70 percent of cats over the age of 3 suffer from periodontal disease.

Prevention and treatment of periodontal disease and oral disease must be a part of the overall wellness program that veterinarians offer their patients, says Charlier. “Dental care non-compliance often results from the lack of recommendation by the veterinary healthcare team. Many practicing veterinarians only had a small amount of formal dental education and training as part of their curriculum in veterinary school.”

Conviction and commitment are critical to the successful delivery of any message in the practice, she says. The manner in which the veterinary team presents information about oral healthcare to clients influences how clients accept its recommendation.

Education is key to a successful dentistry program in veterinary practices, says Charlier. “The entire team – receptionists, technicians, and doctors – must have knowledge concerning veterinary dentistry to enable our practices to establish dentistry standards of care for our patients. Our goal is to create a team that delivers a consistent message about the importance of oral healthcare for our patients.”

For more information on the 2013 AAFP Conference, visit <http://www.catvets.com/professionals/education/conferences/>.



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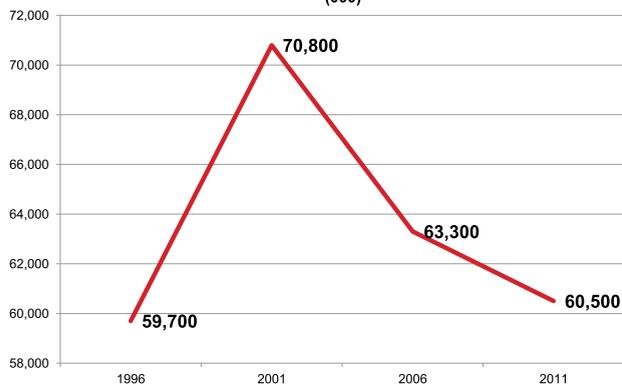
The cat-friendly practice teaches its clients how to make that pre-trip ritual less stressful. “They teach the client to make the carrier part of the furniture in the house, not some bizarre thing covered in cobwebs from the garage,” she says. They can advise their clients to take their cats for a ride in the car from time to time, to get the animal used to be in the car and carrier.

Ready...or not?

Veterinarians have all kinds of opportunities to build their feline practices, according to experts. The question is, will they embrace those opportunities?

Downward Trend Continues

Total Feline Visits, 1996-2011
(000)



AVMA Pet Owner Sourcebook, 2012

That’s difficult to tell. The most recent Bayer study does indeed show a growing recognition of the cat opportunity among veterinarians. But it also shows that a greater percentage of veterinarians still see an increase in dog visits as a top priority for growth (39 percent) vs. increased cat visits (19 percent). On the other hand, 50 percent of respondents said their practice is taking actions to increase visits among current feline patients, 46 percent said they are making an effort to attract more cat-owning clients, and 41 percent said they have taken specific steps to make their practice more friendly to cats/cat owners. But then again, 31 percent

said they have no intention to do anything to improve cat visits despite recognizing the opportunity.

“As a practice owner, at a time when the economy and a lot of practices are suffering, or at least challenged, I see a terrific story of opportunity,” says Colleran. “We know about this unmet need; we have the time, because we have appointment slots, and we have the staff members. Now we can take this knowledge and translate it into action items.”

Some veterinarians have already figured out how to increase cat visits, says Thomas. Others may be convinced of the need to do so, but aren’t sure how to go about it.

Says von Simson, “It’s one thing to say, ‘My client has a difficult time getting their cat to the clinic.’ Veterinarians want to know, ‘What can I do about it?’” That’s one reason Bayer partnered with AAFP on the latest study. “We understood we needed to get beyond the point of [recognizing the opportunity] and to help implement solutions.”

“Clearly, one of the things they need to do is to go to the AAFP website and download information on Cat Friendly Practices,” says Thomas.

To date, almost 900 practices are involved in AAFP’s Cat Friendly Practice initiative, says Colleran. As they develop a track record, they will demonstrate to others the bottom-line and healthcare benefits associated with becoming cat-friendly. Another benefit is that the program will continue to develop materials and resources for practices, as being cat-friendly is an ongoing process, she adds.

“The recognition by so many [Cat Friendly Practice participants] of the opportunity is quite heartening,” she says. “The goal is to provide veterinarians with real resources to make improvements in their practices. The AAFP has already put together this program, and now we just need to integrate it into our practices.”

“The number of unfilled appointment times does not go unrecognized by practice owners and managers. This is a time of real soul-searching about how we build and maintain healthy businesses at a time when the source of information about pet care is wide, varied and often contradictory.” ■