



I think all veterinarians have a few professional moments that have tattooed themselves onto their memories. I vividly recall a specific canine patient that presented during an overnight shift when I was a lime green veterinary intern.

When I first met the patient, his body was slumped over the triage table; this rapidly progressing, 2-year-old pointer mix was in decidedly critical condition. He was cyanotic, exhibiting violent grand mal seizures, and simultaneously having hematochezia. According to his owner, he was discharged from another specialty hospital only hours earlier, and I was to become the third veterinarian to care for him within 24 hours.

At that hour of the night, I was armed with the knowledge of the medical expenses incurred earlier in the day but unfortunately little more. While my client worried over finances, I dwelled on the fact that an entire medical record of valuable information was locked within the other practice's walls, inaccessible until the morning.

I was faced with the choice thousands of veterinarians in my position make: start from scratch (repeating diagnostics) or fly with a blindfold. I chose the former, ultimately arriving at the unexpected diagnosis of canine distemper virus in this vaccinated dog. Even more unusual, he survived.

I remember fretting over that patient for my entire shift and the next few shifts. But this case also opened my newly minted veterinary eyes to what *still* feels like an obvious and solvable technology problem: accessing medical records anywhere, anytime.

And in the years since, I have continued to fret over that.

In honor of the technology issue of *Veterinary Team Brief*, I would like to skim the surface of the current state of veterinary practice software. I hope this serves as a necessary call to action for our industry.

### How We Got Here

They are traditionally known as practice-management software, patient information-management systems,

## Veterinary practice software is becoming the thread that ties our diverse industry together.

electronic medical records, or electronic veterinary medical records.<sup>1</sup>

In short, there is no technology as pervasive. Whether serving a feline-only practitioner in a one-veterinarian practice, an emergency veterinarian working an overnight shift, or a cattle veterinarian protecting our nation's food supply, veterinary practice software is becoming the thread that ties our diverse industry together.

But most of the popular practice-management systems are just that—systems initially designed decades ago *to manage the practice* (ie, schedules, inventory, cash registers).

But as veterinary medicine evolves, digital medical records have become enormously valuable. Online data sharing has become easy and cheap, and a wide range of devices has become omnipresent.

### Meet Our Industry's 800-Pound Gorilla

We are in a unique time when more veterinarians are transitioning their practices to become fully digital, exponentially increasing the amount of time veterinarians spend interacting with practice software. Each year, new offerings emerge and legacy ones “innovate,” but many veterinarians

agree that it just feels like more of the same.

A recent study in human medicine documented physician discontent with existing electronic record systems, which led the American Medical Association to call for an overhaul, pointing to these systems “taking a significant toll on physicians.”<sup>2</sup>

Anecdotal evidence supports the same in the veterinary industry. Yet still, articles are continuously published singing their praises and explaining their benefits. But those of us in the trenches understand that the entire profession has an 800-pound gorilla in our examination rooms.<sup>3-5</sup>

That gorilla? The need for massive innovation in veterinary software.

### A Bellwether of More Inadequacies

In a day and age where I can start and stop reading an e-book on the same page, on any device, from any place, I am left with the following basic question:

*Why is something as consequential as veterinary (and human, for that matter) health records still not widely available in a similar format through modern communicating software?*

“Properly understood, any new and better way of doing things is technology.”

—Peter Thiel

In 7 years of seeking answers, I have uncovered that hidden within this problem is a much bigger problem.

I am still left with lingering questions about the case described above. Why did my patient survive? Did his coinfection with Rocky Mountain spotted fever play a part? What about the repeated treatments of fresh frozen plasma for his secondary coagulopathy? And why did his vaccinated immune system not offer protection in the first place?

Like many of you, I work in practices that are fully paperless. So why can't I effortlessly leverage my software to find similar cases and identify care-improving patterns? And if I could, what could it teach a generation of veterinarians about the next distemper case?

The deeper I dig, the more I realize that these questions are just a bellwether of many more missed opportunities in the current field of veterinary software offerings.

### If You Build It, They Will Come

Peter Thiel, author of recent innovation bible *Zero to One*, states it best:

“Properly understood, any new and better way of doing things is technology.”<sup>6</sup>

Our profession has some well-documented challenges, and I would argue that practice software plays a large role. Unless we demand new and better ways of doing things, we are unlikely to get to the future we need.

The first step is recognition. I once calculated that I spend roughly 80% of my day in front of software, leaving little time with my patients and clients. Is that why *you* got into the veterinary profession?

If you feel that your current veterinary software partner could do more to understand your needs, speak up. When answering surveys, be candid and think big about how your software could do better to help you more. Doing so helps ensure that veterinary software receives necessary guidance from in-the-trench veterinarians. And if the companies do not listen, be more willing to bear the difficulty of software system transitions to try newer offerings.

I believe that as goes the veterinarian, so goes the practice, *not the other way around*. Software systems should first and foremost make the practicing veterinarian better, faster, more accurate, and more in touch with all the available information.

Truly innovative software has the unique opportunity to help veterinary professionals communicate with each other, catch errors, connect to new treatments, illuminate previously hidden clinical patterns, get through daily paperwork faster, and ultimately unleash an army of in-practice researchers who could actually push medicine further. ■

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**Editor's note:** Dr. Caleb Frankel has lectured on technology for IDEXX. He can be contacted at [VMDtechnology.com](http://VMDtechnology.com).

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