



## Communicate Costs Clearly & Confidently

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Clients often misunderstand fees, which leads to a biased perception of the cost of veterinary medicine. Unless clients understand what their veterinarian is doing and why, they may walk away from a visit fuming over the amount they just spent.

How often does a client say something like this during the checkout process?

*Cytology? What is that, and why am I being charged \$54 for it? I do not remember the veterinarian doing anything but examine my dog.*

Or,

*A physical examination costs \$54? All the veterinarian did was pet my dog. If I got \$54 every time I did that, I would be a millionaire.*

Most team members have heard such comments at least once.

## Lumps & Bumps

The last thing any practice wants to see is an online review like this:

ABC Animal Hospital only cares about money, and they robbed me blind last week. My dog has a tiny bump on her belly, and they would not give me any advice on the phone. The receptionist would not even let me talk to the veterinarian and instead made me schedule an appointment that ended up being a total rip-off. It was \$108, and there is absolutely nothing wrong with my dog!

Such a review is a direct result of a client walking away with no appreciation for the value of the services received. This is not the client's fault, though. When the veterinary team fails to communicate the reason for a recommendation, specific diagnostic test, or treatment plan, the client has no way of understanding the value of the dollar amount he or she is being charged.

The perceived value starts with the physical examination. When Mrs. Jones calls to ask about a bump on her dog's belly, is this what the client service representative says?

*I am sorry, but the veterinarian will need to examine your dog. It is against our policy to give advice over the phone.*

## BENCHMARKS

### Median Fees

- Physical examination: \$54
- Cytology (fine-needle aspiration): \$54

**SOURCE:** Benchmarks 2017: A Study of Well-Managed Practices. Columbus, OH: WMPB; 2017:20,27.

If so, Mrs. Jones may feel she has to come to the practice because of a rule, not because her dog and the bump need to be examined. A better response would be:

*We should get that bump checked out, Mrs. Jones. Dr. Smith will need to do a complete nose-to-tail examination to make sure Fluffy has no other hidden lumps or bumps or anything else going on.*

## Constant Communication

Communicating what and why does not end with scheduling the appointment. The physical examination is an opportunity to demonstrate to the client the value of the \$54 fee. As the veterinarian feels from nose to tail, he or she should tell the client what is being examined, along with the findings. Suddenly, Fluffy is no longer just being petted—she is truly being examined thoroughly, and any findings are being shared. This approach emphasizes the value of the service.

Once the bump that Mrs. Jones found is reached, it is time to present the recommended treatment plan. Does the veterinarian say something like this?

*I found just the one small bump. I am going to quickly take Fluffy to the treatment area to take a better look.*

Mrs. Jones may think better lighting is necessary to take a closer look and be more than a little surprised when she sees a \$54 charge for “Cytology (fine-needle aspiration).” Clear, confident communication is a must. Telling the client what should be done and how much it will cost is not enough—explaining why the pet needs the recommended treatment is essential.

Here is a better way to communicate:

*I did not find any additional bumps, Mrs. Jones. I am going to mark this bump's location and size with today's date on Fluffy's record so we can track it over*

*time and make sure it does not get larger. We need to take a small sample of cells from the bump using a needle that will not hurt Fluffy. I will be able to see under the microscope if any of the cells could be cancerous. This will take just a few minutes and will hopefully give us peace of mind. My veterinary nurse will give you an estimate of the cost for the test.*

Presented in this manner, the client better understands a diagnostic test is being performed in addition to the physical examination, and an extra cost is associated with the recommended service. The client heard what the veterinarian wants to do and why and also was informed that Fluffy *needed* the test to rule out cancer. The communication was not at all wishy-washy but confident and clear.

After performing the cytology, does the veterinarian or veterinary nurse deliver the results this way?

*Everything looks good, Mrs. Jones. See you at Fluffy's annual checkup.*

## Resources

- Communications toolbox. Partners for Healthy Pets. [partnersforhealthypets.org/communications.aspx](http://partnersforhealthypets.org/communications.aspx)
- *Educating Your Clients from A to Z: What to Say and How to Say It*. Boss N. AAHA Press; 2011.

## TAKE ACTION

- 1 To help ensure clients perceive the value of any service their pet receives, always explain not only *what* procedure is being performed but also *why*.
- 2 Teach the entire veterinary team how to communicate clearly so clients understand the need for a service and its associated cost.

This likely leaves the client wondering exactly what he or she paid for, and if the test was even needed. A more detailed response gives the client more information about what the test showed.

*I looked at the sample under the microscope, Mrs. Jones, and all the cells looked benign. I am glad you brought this to my attention as soon as you found it because catching any problem early can lead to better medical outcomes.*

Communicating in this manner helps ensure Mrs. Jones feels like a good pet parent who is working with her veterinary team to assure her pet lives a long, healthy life. (See **Resources**.) The checkout process is more likely to go smoothly and her online review will likely be similar to the following.

Dr. Smith at ABC Animal Hospital is the best! She explains what is going on with my dog and is always so professional. Her team takes the time to go over an estimate before doing any tests so I know what things will cost. I am so relieved to know my dog is healthy and has many years ahead of her.

## Conclusion

Words do matter, and the way in which patient needs are communicated has a dramatic impact on whether or not clients see the value of veterinary services. Veterinarians and their teams will gain the most traction when they clearly explain what they are recommending and why the recommendation is necessary for the patient. ■



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**FUN FACT:** In a former life, Brenda hustled on the 9-ball circuit and was once ranked a semiprofessional player by the Women's Professional Billiards Association.