

CLEANING HOUSE

EDENTULATING THE GERIATRIC PERIODONTAL PATIENT

Consider the dog or cat at risk of periodontal disease. This is the patient that has required annual oral hygiene procedures to keep ahead of periodontal disease. The patient that if you skipped a year, you would be extracting teeth rather than just cleaning them. It is also the patient that despite the annual professional care, the periodontal situation has been gradually (or rapidly) deteriorating and extractions have already been required. Now the animal is entering its golden years and the notion of an annual general anesthetic to battle dental disease is starting to become a less attractive idea. What to do?

I am not talking about the 10-year-old shepherd who has had its teeth cleaned twice and has never had any significant periodontal disease. I am talking about the high-maintenance periodontal patient.

As we age, a number of nasty things happen (hair falling out, gravity grasping body parts to pull them down, some body parts shrinking while others expand...). One predictable outcome of growing old is that the ability to fend off the effects of periodontal disease declines. So, if an animal has been periodontally challenged throughout its life, you can predict that things will get worse in the later years (more rapid progression of disease requiring more aggressive therapy just to remain stable).

So what have we got here? An animal that is going to need increasingly aggressive periodontal treatment to prevent/control infection in an animal that we are increasing less comfortable anesthetizing. Bit of a rock-versus-hard place situation. ***It would seem that the***

options are increase the frequency of anesthetics and professional care to control disease or turn our back on the patient's dental health and just let the mouth rot for the animal's remaining days. Neither of those options sound very appealing (or medically appropriate).

When we think of dentistry, we often think of treating teeth to keep them in the head for as long as possible. This is certainly the approach taken by dentists working on human patients, but it is not necessarily right for our patients. ***In my view the highest priority in every treatment plan is the elimination and prevention of oral pain and infection.*** Everything else is subservient to this 'Prime-Directive'.

Does a domesticated house cat or dog require teeth? No. The "prey" is already dead and in small pieces in the food bowl. The territory is safe and fighting for breeding rights is not an issue.

So, when you get to the point that keeping the toothed-mouth healthy is not going to be feasible, make the mouth toothless. Just clean house and remove every single remaining tooth and root so that you will never have to worry about periodontal infection ever again.

Deciding exactly when you have reached the right time for the final dental procedure depends on several criteria and requires some crystal-ball gazing. You want to do it *before* the anesthetic risk is too high. That is sort of like saying you should change your light bulbs the day before they burn out.

If you have a patient who has already lost a bunch of teeth, look critically at those remaining. If they are scattered about the mouth in such a way as to be functionally insignificant, then there

may be no benefit to the patient in leaving them in the mouth to be dealt with later so maybe that is when it is time to clean house.

If you have a client who has been resistant to dental treatment over the years (fear of anesthetic, fear of expense...) and you may only have one chance to make a difference in the patient's life, maybe you should make it one big procedure when you have the chance.

All of this also applies to cats that have had ongoing issues with resorptive lesions. If you have had to extract a few teeth due to resorptive lesions every time you anesthetize, there is a good chance the remaining teeth will someday develop lesions. If you do not want to have to deal with them later, deal with them now and be done with it.

Many clients may at first be resistant to the idea of removing all the teeth after years of efforts that seemed to be aimed at keeping the teeth in the mouth. Remind them that dogs and cats in the domestic situation do far better with no teeth than with bad teeth. ***The highest priority is a mouth free of pain and infection now and for the rest of the patient's life.*** Neglecting periodontal and oral health in the later years due to anesthetic concerns is far worse than being toothless. And remember, just putting the old animal on long-term antibiotics as a compromise is no good so don't even consider that as an option.