THE ROLE OF THE VETERINARY TECHNICIAN IN THE DELIVERY OF VETERINARY DENTAL CARE.

This book, and indeed, this entire course, has been designed for veterinary technicians. Its purpose is to train you as veterinary dental technicians.

As with all areas of veterinary medicine, there are limitations, imposed by law, on what procedures a technician is allowed to perform, though there may be some differences between jurisdictions. As mentioned in the Forward, invasive dental procedures such as extractions and periodontal surgery are to be performed by a licensed veterinarian. Similarly, making a diagnosis and prescribing medications and treatment are the responsibility of the attending clinician.

With these limitations in mind, let us examine some of the areas where your skills and training can be of great value to your patients and to your practice. I will look at a hypothetical oral hygiene procedure from start to finish and outline those tasks for which this course will train you.

Assume a pet has been examined at vaccine time and the veterinarian has recommended that a dental cleaning be scheduled. Do not assume that the doctor had the time to do a complete oral examination and discuss the procedure thoroughly with the owner. There may have been many other issues to discuss during that fifteen minute appointment.

Some time prior to the animal's arrival (a few days before perhaps), review the medical record for any notations that might impact on the treatment plan and discuss them with the doctor. There may be a note about PU/PD that suggests the need for some pre-operative blood work and urinalysis. There may be a note about an antibiotic reaction in the past that should be flagged prior to starting pre-operative antibiotics. There may be a request that the next time the animal is under anesthetic, a cyst be removed or hip radiographs taken. There may be a note about mitral valve insufficiency which would suggest the need for antibiotic treatment starting 48 hours pre-operatively. Whatever it may be, reviewing the records helps to avoid problems and to ensure maximum benefit at minimum risk.

Review the previous dental records, if any, to see what areas were of concern in the past. There may have been a tooth with a 4 millimeter deep periodontal pocket that will need careful reassessment to see if prior treatments and home-care have been effective in controlling the situation. There may have been a chipped tooth that requires radiographic follow-up to assess the status of the pulp.

The Pre-Admission Interview is Crucial to Understanding your Clients Needs

By the time the animal is presented for admission, all pre-operative diagnostics have been done, the results interpreted and the doctor has given approval to proceed. Before letting the client leave the building, you should spend a few minutes with them outlining the planned treatment. You should explain the need for general anesthesia in order to do the procedure properly. You should outline what is involved in doing a thorough oral hygiene procedure. Explain that during your more detailed examination, with the pet under anesthesia, you may well find unexpected problems. Try to get a sense of how the owner would like you to proceed in the event of a surprise (extraction, try to treat it or referral to a specialist). Try to get some idea of the level of commitment that the owner is willing to make. This commitment may be financial (how much treatment are they willing to pay for) or in respect to home-care (will they brush the teeth daily to control plaque). Finally, get a signature of consent to carry out the proposed treatment and a phone number where the client can be contacted intra-operatively, should you find it necessary to alter the treatment plan for any reason.

In some instances, owners may be in a hurry and may wish to just drop the pet off and leave. These are not shirts being dropped off for a wash and light starch. Every effort should be made to ensure adequate communications between client and clinic pre-operatively.

Prior to anesthetizing a patient, you should do another, careful examination of the pet. Assess skull type as it will relate to the teeth. Brachycephalics (boxer, Lhasa Apsos...) often have severe crowding of maxillary teeth leading to periodontal disease as well as malocclusions which can cause both soft tissue and dental trauma. Look for any facial swellings or asymmetry and any nasal or ocular discharges as these may be due to a tooth root abscess or a tumor. Any such findings should be brought to the attention of the doctor involved in the case for further evaluation before proceeding with the anesthetic.

Careful Review of the Patient History and the Treatment Plan will help Avoid Nasty Surprises

Do as thorough an oral examination as possible to review what sort of case it is going to be (simple scale & polish or whole-mouth extraction). This helps you ensure that you have all necessary equipment and materials ready BEFORE you start and that you have enough time scheduled for the case. Once you are confident that everything is ready for the patient, you can proceed with the induction of general anesthesia.

With the animal at an appropriate plane of anesthesia, monitors in place and everything stable, you can start treatment. The specifics of treatment are covered in more detail later on. The basic steps to be followed are:

- antibacterial oral rinse,
- gross coronal scaling,
- careful evaluation of each tooth including exploration and periodontal probing,
- charting of findings, making note of any abnormalities which require further investigation (radiographs usually) or treatment,
- fine coronal and sulcar scaling.

- At this stage, the veterinarian should be called in to review the case. All areas of concern should be pointed out for evaluation. It is the veterinarian who is responsible for making the diagnosis and deciding on the treatment. If there are any surgical procedures, such as root planing or extractions, the veterinarian should do them at this point. If the veterinarian agrees that radiographs are indicated, the technician can expose and develop the films and screen them to ensure they are of diagnostic quality for the veterinarian.

- Once all surgical procedures have been completed, the technician can step in to finish the procedure with a polishing and sulcar lavage.

After the procedure is complete and the animal is in recovery, the veterinary dental technician must clean the instruments and treatment area in preparation for the next case. There will be more discussion on infection control and equipment maintenance further on. Also, the technician should help to devise and implement policies regarding patient and operator safety before, during and after the dental procedure.

At discharge time, the veterinarian may wish to speak with the owners regarding the treatment, particularly if it has been extensive. In some cases, however, the veterinary dental technician can discharge the patient. At this time, the dental chart and radiographs should be reviewed with the owner to outline the findings and what treatments were done. Immediate and long-term home-care instructions should be discussed and a written copy sent home. The technician can be a valuable source of information to the client and should work at establishing a rapport that will encourage the client to ask questions and seek the proper advice when problems arise. Try to reinforce the idea that veterinarian, technician and owner are all members of the same team working together to ensure the well-being of the pet.