Healing the Top Three Compliance Breaks

Be vigilant about diagnostics and preventatives in today's economy

by: Wendy s. Myers, Communication Solutions for Veterinarians Inc.

When I visited a South Florida practice, a veterinarian shared concerns about declining compliance in a down economy. Despite her recommendations for annual heartworm testing, intestinal parasite testing every six months, and year-round parasite preventatives, some clients weren't compliant. During the last five years, she diagnosed an average of five heartworm positive dogs annually. In 2009, 30 tested positive. That's an increase of 83%. Although practices may be seeing the recession recede, the habits that clients follow today could continue in better times. Here are three compliance breaks and how you can take action.

Annual Heartworm Testing

Follow recommendations from the American Heartworm Society (www.heartworm-society.org) and Companion Animal Parasite Council (www.capcvet.org) for annual testing in dogs and periodic testing in cats. Like the South Florida veterinarian, tell clients if you're diagnosing more heartworm disease in your practice. After all, these heartworm positive pets live in your neighborhood. Skipping or stretching time between doses could put pets at risk.

Post disease incidence maps for your area in exam rooms. IDEXX shares reference lab data on www.dogsandticks.com and www.kittytest.com. Enter your state and county to discover prevalence for diseases including canine and feline heartworm, Lyme, Ehrlichia, Anaplasma, feline leukemia virus, and feline immunodeficiency virus.

Require Annual Heartworm Tests to Refill Preventatives

This validates manufacturers' guarantees and ensures pets can continue to safely take medication. Be vigilant about annual heartworm testing if clients are buying preventatives elsewhere. At a Florida veterinary hospital, a client's German shepherd tested positive for heartworm. The veterinarian was surprised because she knew the client gave preventatives year-round. Then the pet owner confessed to buying from an online pharmacy to save money. The internet pharmacy had dispensed a product manufactured in Australia that was in kilograms as well as the wrong size for a German shepherd. Saving a few dollars cost the client $1,200 in medical bills.

Semi-Annual Intestinal Parasite Testing

Make appointment confirmation calls and remind clients to bring fecal samples. "This is Wendy calling from Your Veterinary Hospital to confirm your appointment for Sophie with Dr. Myers tomorrow at 10:30 am. Please remember to bring a teaspoon-size stool sample that is fresh within 4 hours as well as any medication and supplements you're giving to Sophie. We look forward to seeing you tomorrow at 10:30 am. If you have questions or need to reschedule, please call us at 555-555-5555."

Confirmation calls ensure that more clients arrive with samples in hand. Asking them to bring medications and supplements identifies "extra" doses of preventatives that were never given, as well as, self-diagnosed and prescribed drugs. For example, a client has a 12 pack of preventatives with three remaining doses and a bottle of aspirin she occasionally gives her 10-year-old Golden retriever "when he feels painful." This lets you revisit the importance of monthly preventative dosing, as well as, diagnostic testing and veterinary drugs for arthritis.

If clients forget fecal samples, collect them. Tell the client, "I'm taking Sophie to the treatment area where we'll collect a stool sample for her intestinal parasite test. We will screen for multiple intestinal parasites, including those that can be passed from pets to people." Avoid saying "I'm taking Sophie in the back," which may make some clients anxious to be separated from their pets. "Treatment area" is more professional.

If you're unable to collect samples, send clients home with collection cups. Say, "We were unable to collect a sample from Sophie so I'm sending you home with this prepaid collection cup. Just drop off her stool sample in the cup at your convenience and we'll call you with test results. We'll also call you as a courtesy reminder if you haven't dropped off her sample within seven days. " Enter a callback for one week later in case the client forgets to return the collection cup.

Just as you require current vaccinations for boarding pets, make sure patients have current intestinal parasite tests if they are receiving boarding, grooming, surgical, or dental services. Because pets will go to the bathroom in your yard, don't risk intestinal parasites in your soil that could infect other patients or pose zoonotic risks for staff members. Intestinal parasites can survive for years in the soil.

Year-Round Preventative Dispensing

A 2009 Merial study found 64% of dogs leave veterinary clinics without heartworm preventatives. Send every client home with a 12 pack. Too often, practice teams default to whatever the client requests. Instead, tell clients in the exam room "We're sending home 12 months of parasite prevention for Sophie. Would you also like a reminder on the day of the month you're going to give Sophie her preventative? " Use manufacturers' product websites or www.remindmypet.com for monthly e-mail or text message reminders. Also, send refill reminders for preventatives so clients have consistent monthly dosing.

Promote manufacturers' rebates, coupons, and free doses. This protects your pharmacy business, encourages year-round compliance, and helps clients save money. Tell clients, "When you buy a 12 pack of parasite preventatives, you also get a $____ manufacturer's rebate. Do you want to save an additional $____ today?"

Use the term "parasite preventative" rather than "heartworm pill." Most drugs protect pets from heartworms and intestinal parasites, which increases clients' perception of value, as well as, the importance of monthly dosing.

When you focus on diagnostics to detect diseases and preventatives to prevent problems, you'll protect patients' health as well as practice income. Discuss which actions you'll implement with your practice team today.

Wendy S. Myers owns Communication Solutions for Veterinarians in Denver. Her consulting firm helps teams improve compliance, client service and practice management. Communication Solutions for Veterinarians has provided mystery phone shopper training to more than 1,600 receptionists nationwide. Wendy also is a partner in Animal Hospital Specialty Center, a 12-doctor AAHA-accredited referral practice offering internal medicine, surgery, oncology, and emergency care in Highlands Ranch, Colorado. She is the author of four books and five videos. Subscribe to Communication Solutions for Veterinarians' e-newsletter at www.csvets.com.