WHY SHOULD WE WORRY ABOUT ORAL HEALTH?

A healthy mouth is a healthy body!!! It’s as true for our pets as it is for us. In human medicine, periodontal disease has been proven to be linked to many disease processes. Based on studies done by the American Veterinary Dental Society, 85% of adult pets have some stage of dental disease. The bacteria found in the plaque and tartar can also cause harmful effects to our pet’s heart, lungs, kidneys and liver. If left untreated, this infection causing bacteria will lead to issues in the mouth like: gingivitis, bleeding gums, excessive drooling, tooth decay, root infections, bone loss, abscesses, tooth mobility and even tooth loss. Our profession has come a long way and we are at the point were good oral health goes hand in hand with the overall care of our patients. We need to be advocates for our patients and their teeth. It is no longer acceptable to think that since they are eating, then they must be fine and pain free. We know better so we must do better!

Almost all dogs and cats will continue to eat no matter what ailments they may be experiencing. This is true for one simple reason – the instinct of survival. To better relate, let us put ourselves in their situation. Imagine if you were stuck on a deserted island with a broken or abscessed tooth. Would you stop eating? Certainly not! You would continue to eat, drink, breathe and live day to day. You would not be the healthiest or most comfortable person in the world but you would learn how to live with it – and that is what our pet’s do! They learn how to live with it because they do not have a choice. They live in a world in which they cannot express themselves through words, but rather actions. So although they may not be able to tell us that one of their right lower molars is moving, they may instead choose to eat their food on the left side of their mouth. Still others may opt to swallow their food whole, shy away from dry food altogether, or simply prefer not to chew on their toys. It is up to us as animal health care professionals to provide adequate medical attention, which includes proper dental care.

As with everything in life, preventative maintenance is much easier (and less expensive) than medical treatment. By doing regular home care and routine professional dental cleanings we can help prevent periodontal disease or diagnose it before it advances. This will save many of our patient’s from the pain and systemic harm dental disease can cause. I believe that we have ignored dentistry for too long in our field. That is why we must take the extra time and effort now to educate pet owners about the benefits of good oral health. The pet owner of today is not the same as it was 50 or even 20 years ago. Pets have become parts of our family and in many cases take the place of spouses or children. They are savvier and are looking for higher quality medical care for their pets. It is up to us to teach them that dental care is also part of their pets overall wellness. It is my dream that within the next 20 years, we will not have to spend so much time convincing pet owners that this is true. They will just know that home care should be part of a daily routine and professional dental cleanings should be evaluated/performed every 6 – 12 months.
TEACHING CLIENTS DENTAL AWARENESS

Owners make a common mistake of thinking that if their pet is eating, then they must not be in pain. What we need to help them understand is that cats and dogs will eat - no matter what! The alternative of starving to death is not an option. Many of us have seen horrific dental issues where the pet’s continue with their daily activities. Owners will often act bewildered that their pet would still act so normal even with such a severe situation in their mouth. It is up to us to teach them just how periodontal disease progresses and how it can affect the rest of the body.

Dental problems do not get better on their own – they usually get worse and the pet will only stop eating once it has reached a critical stage. Getting owners to understand the basics of oral anatomy and periodontal disease will help identify problems. There are many signs that we can look for at home and in the office that gives us an indication that there may be oral issues. Learning to recognize these signs and recommend the appropriate treatment plan will lead to better overall care of our patients.

Veterinary professionals and owners need to be able to recognize the signs of dental disease before it is too late. Some common signs that a pet may be experiencing a dental issue are explained below:

Bad breath, plaque, tartar – All of these indicate the presence of bacteria in the mouth and yet are sometimes overlooked by the veterinary healthcare team and owners. We must start intervening at the first signs of periodontal disease and by doing so can help prevent sources of pain and discomfort for our patients. Remember, if it’s clean, then it doesn’t smell!

Excessive drooling – This can sometimes be a sign of pain when holding the mouth closed, a salivary problem, or even an oral malignancy. The drool can be clear, blood tinged or brown depending on the severity of what is causing it.

Red, swollen, or bleeding gums – Once the gingival tissue has begun to react, we are seeing an active disease process in the mouth. Swollen or bleeding gingival tissue is often the result of something more serious occurring below the gum tissue. Take this as a red flag from the mouth alerting you to something going on below the gum tissue that needs to be addressed.

Facial swelling, nasal or eye discharge – The root structures of the maxillary teeth are extremely close to the sinus cavities and eye orbits. It is wise to consider conducting a thorough oral exam or any patient displaying these types of symptoms. The mandibular tooth root structures can be responsible for swellings or unhealing wounds along the lower jaw. This is especially true for our smaller patients because the bone tissue between the tooth roots and the sinuses and eye orbit is paper thin. Once you have an infection in a tooth root it is very likely you will see that infection spread to another area very quickly.

Changes in chewing or eating habits – Many pets will adopt a new type of chewing behavior if eating a particular way causes pain. Sometimes they will show more interest in soft food versus the dry food because it is easier to chew. They might also shy away from hard chew toys and bones because of the pain it causes in their mouths. Owners have become very in tune with their pet’s eating and chewing habits – so pay attention when they are describing these behaviors to you. After all, the see their pet’s on a more regular basis and would pick up on these subtle changes. Sometimes having them show you a video of the action helps see what is going on in the pet’s natural environment.
Going to food but not eating – Pets can display this behavior if the pain of chewing has become too much for them to deal with. They show signs of having an appetite by going to the food dish, but cannot bring themselves to chew the food because it has become too painful.

Swallowing whole food – When the only option is dry food, pets will adapt and learn to either chew on one side of their mouths or just swallow the food whole. This prevents them from having to use the teeth that are painful when eating. One common observation is a disparity in the amount of tartar around the mouth. If there is a painful tooth on one side, then the pet will tend to eat on the other side. You will see a heavier amount of tartar on the side with the painful tooth because there is less contact time between the food and the teeth.

Dropping food out of mouth – This behavior is observed when the pet tries to chew their food but cannot complete the chewing process because the affected teeth elicit a pain response that causes the cat or dog to drop its food. The instinct to eat and survive is strong which is why it is common to see them still eating even when dealing with severe dental pain or infection.

Tooth loss – There will be times when owners find their pet’s teeth on the ground and bring them in to see if they are ok. Remember that the problem has not been fixed simply because the offending tooth has fallen out. It takes a long period of time for a tooth to become so diseased that it simply comes out of its socket. You must explain to the owner that whatever caused this will likely cause the loss of other surrounding teeth. The best thing to do to prevent any further infection and discomfort to the pet would be to schedule a dental procedure to clean and evaluate the entire mouth.

Baby teeth – Retained deciduous teeth are perhaps so misunderstood by owners because humans hardly ever have issues with our baby teeth. Take the time to educate your clients on the reasons why this happens and the negative side effects they can have. Not only are the corresponding adult teeth being pushed out of their normal spots, but having two teeth occupy the same space will lead to early periodontal disease.

**EXPLAINING THE EFFECTS OF PERIODONTAL DISEASE**

Being able to explain all of these issues will lead to better understanding and compliance by your clients. This includes demonstrating to owners the basics of veterinary dentistry. Start by showing them the different stages of periodontal disease. I have found it be very effective to use picture albums or slide shows in the exam room. This really helps to educate pet owners that periodontal disease is not something that is going to get better on its own. It continues to progress if left untreated and the pet tends to suffer in silence as it gets worse. Very rarely do pets stop eating even when faced with advanced periodontal disease.

**WHAT DOES A COMPLETE DENTAL PROCEDURE INVOLVE?**

Most owners have no concept of what is involved in a complete dental procedure or Oral ATP (Oral Assessment and Treatment Plan). They first need to understand the importance of each step we are taking from the preanesthetic visit, to the procedure day, and all the way through to the discharge. Almost everything that is done in human dentistry can be done in veterinary dentistry. That being said, we have to be strong advocates of home care and maintenance professional cleanings for prevention. In order for a dental procedure to be considered, patients
must first have a recent exam and pre-anesthetic bloodwork to make sure they are good candidates for general anesthesia. General anesthesia is necessary to do a complete and safe job of removing the bacteria from all surfaces of the teeth. It is important to remove the bacteria from the subgingival spaces where periodontal disease begins and not just cosmetically clean the crowns of the teeth. This is essential in providing the highest quality dental procedure. Proper anesthetic protocol gives us the ability to clean, examine and treat any affected teeth. Oxygen and a gas inhalant are delivered through a cuffed endotracheal tube to keep an open and protected airway. This allows us to scale and polish all surfaces of the teeth, both above and below the gumline safely and effectively. We are then able to perform a complete oral exam to uncover any abnormalities. This involves examining each individual tooth – adult cats have 30 teeth, adult dogs have 42. Every finding should be charted into their permanent dental record. Dental radiographs are needed to properly evaluate the health of all the tooth and root structures. Some conditions commonly found in the oral cavity are (but not limited to): loose teeth, missing teeth, retained deciduous teeth, fractured teeth, discolored teeth, worn teeth, rotated teeth, crowded teeth, gingival recession, exposed roots, abscessed roots, periodontal pockets, oral masses.

HOW DO YOU HANDLE RESISTANCE?

The best way to deal with clients who are resistant to the idea of scheduling a dental procedure is with education and patience!! We need to educate and arm ourselves with the knowledge to calm any of theirs concerns. Clients will come to us with all kinds of preconceived notions or from friends, family or personal experiences about veterinary dentistry. The only way to calm their fears and address their concerns is to take the time to talk to them and answer whatever questions they may have.

When it comes to high quality dental procedures, usually the top two concerns involve anesthesia and money. These are very sensitive subjects for most owners and are best handled in the privacy of an exam room. This is your opportunity to shine and showcase how you as a hospital have addressed these two concerns. When it comes to anesthesia, the first question you must ask yourself is – are we holding ourselves to a higher standard and providing the best service we can offer OR are we just getting by? This involves looking at your current anesthesia and pain management protocols. A good place to look for a reference is at the current AAHA guidelines for Anesthesia.

Once you have established that you are providing high quality anesthesia, then it will be easy to explain this to clients. They want to hear about all the protocols you have in place to make anesthesia as safe as possible for their pet. Again, this will take some time and effort but the rewards will be great for the pet, the owner and the hospital. This is where you will go over the reasons why you require pre anesthetic exams and bloodwork. This is the time for you to go over why intravenous catheters, fluid therapy and surgical monitoring are important. Do you have someone doing the procedure by themselves or do you have additional staff that is focused on monitoring the anesthesia and patient? It might even help to show the owner the dental room so that they can see for themselves how advanced the equipment is. Take a look around the room yourself first and used a critical eye – owners will pick up on even the smallest detail that can lower their confidence in you. This is how you distinguish yourself as a high quality practice when a client says they can have a ‘dental’ done for $100 elsewhere. A difference is price will usually mean a difference in quality.
When it comes to money, dentistry can be a high ticket item. It is usually not an expense that most owners are prepared for, since most of what we do are not cleanings – they are really major dental procedures involving oral surgery. You have to make it possible for people to treat their pets. Become familiar with pet insurance plans and financing options available in your area. We will file all the claim forms for our clients and offer 2 payment plan options: Care Credit and PaymentBanc. This allows owners to break apart payments into something that is more feasible into their monthly budget.

Another reason we here for hesitation is that the pet could not possibly be in pain because they continue to eat. This had been the reasoning for years even by people in our profession. We had an inherent fear of anesthesia and even dentistry for that matter. You would hear of hospitals where the staff would dread doing it. So the belief was passed on to our clients that if the pet is eating then they are okay. We know that is not true. Even if we did believe this or said this 50 years ago, it does not make it okay today.

Today, the dogs that we see are getting smaller and smaller. We know that certain breeds and pets under 25 pounds are going to be more predisposed to early periodontal disease than others. These are usually the pets that are being taken to a groomer regularly when dental services and tooth brushing are offered as a convenience to the owner. My personal opinion to this is that dental care should not be provided by your hairdresser. Studies have shown that brushing the teeth less than 3-4 times a week is not beneficial.

NADS – Non Anesthesia Dental Services – everyone in our profession should be aware of the American Veterinary Dental Collages Position statement on this practice. Become familiar with the services being offered in your area and how they affect you. A high quality dental procedure should include scaling, polishing, probing and radiographic evaluation of ALL tooth surfaces.

Since our pets do not come with expiration dates it is hard to say how old is too old when it comes to needing a dental procedure. Age is not a disease, but periodontal disease is. As long as you have a normal physical exam, normal pre anesthetic diagnostics, and are doing high quality anesthesia – there is no reason not to perform a dental procedure. Every pet is entitled to a comfortable and healthy bite. Not everyone in our profession believes this but if you have made the commitment to advocating for our patients then it will be up to you to do the right thing. You will often hear from clients that either they had pets their whole lives and they never needed dental work or that their ‘other’ vet said it wasn’t a problem. Again, this comes down to education and is by no means a reason to let our patients suffer in silence.

Be wary of products being sold that claim to dissolve plaque and tartar. Do your research so that owners can feel comfortable taking your recommendations when it comes to oral care products.

**Resources on Veterinary Dentistry:**

- American Veterinary Dental College:  www.avdc.org
- Academy of Veterinary Dental Technicians:  www.avdt.us
- Foundation for Veterinary Dentistry:  www.f4vd.com
- Journal of Veterinary Dentistry:  www.jvdonline.org
- Veterinary Oral Health Council:  www.vohc.org
- Oral Care Guidelines:  www.oralatp.com