

Veterinary telemedicine: Tips for expanding your practice virtually

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Abstract

Telemedicine services are a means to provide valuable information in an efficient and economical manner. They can be used to supplement traditional veterinary medicine services for clients with an established VCPR. A variety of commercial platforms are available; however, in most cases the technologies provided by a smart phone are more than adequate. Telemedicine may be implemented into daily practice in the form of triage, diagnosis, assessing welfare, herd or case monitoring, and virtual consultations. Establishing a standardized fee structure to compensate you for your time and expertise is critical in order to ensure success.

Key words: VCPR, virtual consult, communication

Introduction

Many veterinary businesses implemented telemedicine services into their practice model during the COVID-19 pandemic. Veterinary organizations have also since incorporated this communication strategy into the practice guidelines. Guidelines for establishing and maintaining the veterinarian-client-patient relationship (VCPR) in bovine practice set forth by the American Association of Bovine Practitioners states: “Regular site visits are an essential component to providing such oversight, however, this can be supplemented through laboratory data evaluation, records evaluation, telephonic and electronic communication.”¹ As such, all telehealth services should be used as a method to supplement or enhance an existing valid VCPR and should not be used to establish a VCPR.

There are numerous benefits to incorporating veterinary telemedicine services into your practice including: prompt decision making for the animal requiring intervention, more efficient use of time and resources, opportunity to monetize “windshield time”, and ability to “see” more cases in a day. Disadvantages include: inability to perform a thorough examination and potential for reduced revenue/case. It should also be noted, veterinary telemedicine is not appropriate for regulatory work (i.e., CVI).

Specialized software, virtual platforms, and apps are now commercially available for use in veterinary telemedicine including food animal practice. These may not be as convenient for the client to navigate; however, they are exceptionally useful as it pertains to logging medical records. Technologies available on smart phones (photos, videos, face-time, etc.) are adequate for providing telemedicine services; however, maintenance of VCPR and proper record keeping are on the onus of the veterinarian.

Implementation of telemedicine into daily practice

Triage is perhaps one of the most useful areas for using telemedicine. Every veterinarian has had the “is it uterine or vaginal” discussion with a client when it comes to bovine prolapses.

A simple photo could remove all doubt and help prioritize true emergencies. Knowing the state of the animal allows the veterinarian to organize their day in a more efficient manner.

In some cases, it may be appropriate to use telemedicine to diagnose. Let’s take the non-responsive footrot case for example. Clients will often ask what antibiotic to use next, however, no response often means there are complications, or the animal never had footrot to begin with. Some diseases, such as digital dermatitis are not inherently obvious to the client but are very distinctive to the trained eye. A simple photo of the lesion can quickly yield a diagnosis and initiate herd health discussions with the client.

Telemedicine is also useful in determining if an animal is fit for transport or slaughter. Often, the value of the animal has been reduced to salvage value. A farm call with mileage charge and exam fee is not economical for the client. Videos or photos of animals affected with ocular squamous cell carcinoma, lameness, lumpy jaw, congestive heart failure, etc. can be used to assess the animal’s welfare and determine appropriate management.

Time and distance often dictate how often a veterinarian can be on-site to assess the herd or monitor cases. In addition to the annual or semi-annual site visit, telemedicine is a practical alternative to more frequent site visits. This is particularly useful for remote clients where we would like to monitor items such as body condition score or prevalence of lice on a monthly basis but are not regularly in the area.

Last, telemedicine can be used to provide consulting services. The convenience inherent to virtual meetings can help build relationships and streamline communication between the veterinarian and client. Topics for discussion may include herd health protocols, disease identification, crew training and strategic calving pasture management, just to name a few.

Scheduling strategies

Scheduling strategies will vary based on the platform your practice uses to deliver veterinary telemedicine services. Specialized software and apps often have a vet notification feature or option to select a time slot. However, those not using commercially available platforms will likely schedule virtual consultations via the same means as farm calls and office visits. A cell phone located at the receptionist desk designated for client communication can be an economical and practical alternative to software especially in the beginning stages. It is recommended that clients be given this number to submit histories, photos, and/or videos. The receptionist can then relay the information to whatever communication platform is the used by the practice. The virtual consult can simultaneously be input into the daily schedule to facilitate assignment to a veterinarian.

Pricing models

Properly monetizing time and expertise is likely an ongoing challenge for most food animal practices. This is particularly true for practices that traditionally charged for clinical services, but not advice. It is recommended you set a fee guideline for telemedicine services provided by your practice. The authors currently have several pricing models available to their clients. Telemedicine services are often bundled with other consulting services for clients paying annual fees. Clients may also subscribe solely to telemedicine services for an annual rate. Alternatively, clients may pay for telemedicine services on an as-needed basis. For this pricing model, an hourly professional services rate has been established and the client is billed in 10-minute increments. If the client is unaware that telemedicine is a billable service the first time they use the service and you feel the need to discount the first bill, be sure to write a note regarding the discount they received. This helps the client understand the value you provide and enables them to associate a dollar figure with your time and expertise. Often the client

is quite satisfied with the timely and valuable information they received and that they avoided the costs associated with a farm call. Regardless of what pricing model you choose, it is beneficial to have an established fee and contract readily available for those utilizing telemedicine services regularly.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

References

1. *Establishing & Maintaining the Veterinary-Client-Patient-Relationship in Bovine Practice* guidelines, American Association of Bovine Practitioners http://www.aabp.org/resources/aabp_guidelines/VCPRGuideline_032020.pdf

