



**BUSINESS
DEVELOPMENT**

Health care compliance: seize the opportunity for your practice

■ Revenue in the veterinary market has remained largely static, but this doesn't mean growing your practice is a zero-sum game. Improved compliance provides a clear opportunity to achieve both better animal welfare and increase practice revenues ...

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VETERINARY HEALTHCARE COMPLIANCE levels across the sector

are low. This phenomenon is not new; a study some years ago conducted by the American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA) revealed two surprising facts:

- most vets overestimated the compliance they achieved by 50 per cent
- a significant reason for client non-compliance is the practice team fails to make the recommendation in the first place

The key to compliance is to ensure both consistent recommendations and effective communication to raise the proportion of client implementation. In thinking about compliance, we find the acronym CRAFT helpful (Figure 1).

Compliance is, therefore, about management within the practice and managing the means and frequency with which information is communicated to clients.

Failure to recommend

We perform compliance audits of practices and find the level of recommendations low and, often, unrecorded.

A major cause of the failure to recommend is the presumption the client will not accept it, often based on a misperception of the client's willingness to

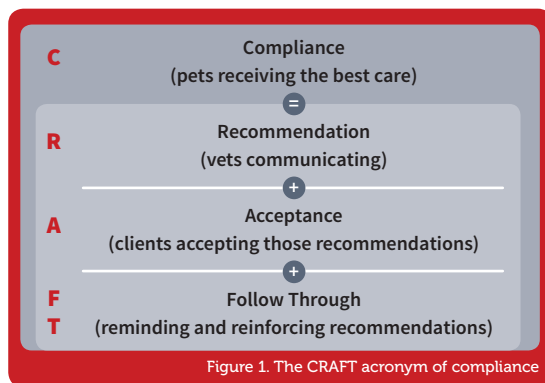


Figure 1. The CRAFT acronym of compliance

pay. In fact, a survey conducted as part of the AAHA study showed, among a series of related findings, 90 per cent of clients wanted to hear all the recommendations for their pet's health regardless of cost, while only 10 per cent wanted to hear only the recommendations the vet thought they could afford.

There was nothing in the study to suggest pet owners are a fundamental barrier to compliance.

Client understanding and inertia

Client awareness and recognition of disease and its prevention are quite low, so many apparently healthy pets live with a range of different health problems. With the annual wellness check typically being of 10 minutes duration, it is inevitable clients then experience information overload. It can be no surprise retention and action on future health care

recommendations is often poor.

Furthermore, in today's busy, crowded lives, getting around to something not front of mind tends to slip from the priority list. With better and more frequent communication, inertia can be changed to activity.

Taking action

What can we do to bridge these recommendation, information and communication gaps?

The first component is to develop the approach within the practice team, agreeing and promoting relatively small changes in the way the group operates – both in management and in the team's protocols. Vets and their staff have more influence than they think – they can make a substantial impact on compliance performance.

The second component is achieved by using the primary benefits of digital technology – improved information and communication. Software

provides clients with more of the information they want and increases the channels by which they receive it. Within the practice, technology can assist the delivery of a consistent, mutually reinforced approach to recommendation.

Given the scale of the opportunity to every practice, this is a prize worth having. Just a small improvement generates enough to pay for an extra vet. But increasing levels of compliance requires a plan – start a compliance programme in your practice and you will be surprised at the results. Just follow this seven-step process.

Seven steps to compliance

1: Measure current compliance

Begin by finding out where you stand – this requires some analysis of your patient data. Look at the main areas of treatment and compare them against practice guidelines or sector benchmarks, which gives a figure for current compliance and the likely revenue improvement. On average, a 3,000 active patient practice might reasonably expect to gain £100,000 over time in additional revenue; the best, considerably more.

2: Involve the entire staff

Practices that involve their staff in compliance achieve significantly higher compliance than those that don't. Staff involvement is essential for consistent wellness recommendations, their mutual reinforcement, the provision of client education and for follow-up. The focus of the discussion with staff is on improving patient care and well-being.

■ Clinical protocols

Staff want to feel ownership of, and be trained in, the practice's clinical guidelines. Here are some ways to achieve this we have found work well:

- Meet as a team and discuss guidelines everyone can agree to follow. Don't rush this – it may take several meetings.
- Use current best practice guidelines from organisations such as WSAVA, Advisory Board of Cat Diseases and International Renal Interest Society as a starting point. Begin with key areas: vaccination, worming, flea control, diet, pre-anaesthetic blood screening and dental prophylaxis. Then move on to other areas, such as arthritis management and blood screening.

- Be specific, write down the guidelines, distribute them to all staff and make them part of your induction process. Regularly refer to them in conversation so they become part of your practice's way of doing things.

■ Management protocols

- In the practice, agree to always make the recommendation. The entire team must approach clients with the assumption they will accept their recommendations.
- Never prejudice a client's level of interest in providing the best care or his or her willingness to pay for a service.
- Agree among the team the follow-up steps you take after recommendation. This is where technology can be invaluable.
- Make compliance one of the first agenda items at your regular practice meeting.

3: Take advantage of technology

By way of example, the digital technology used at Purton

Vets enables consistent recommendations across the whole team, promotes mutual reinforcement and increases the quality and frequency of communication received by clients.

A typical wellness check starts with the client completing an online patient questionnaire linked to their treatment reminder. This engages the client on his or her pet's health care and highlights health problems by providing immediate feedback. His or her answers are displayed to the vet on the screen during the consult. Previous recommendations and relevant practice guidelines are available on the screen.

Clicking tick boxes during the consult generates information and recommendations. The system gathers this together into a "BUPA-style" health report, which is emailed to the client and appears on his or her dedicated pet portal. Clients receive – at a carefully calibrated frequency – automated appointment and treatment reminders. Together, this gently reinforces, nudges and promotes the action to be taken by the client.

It's a world away from a single 10-minute interaction with the vet: his or her professional advice is available 24/7 and reinforced by tailored communication.

The technology captures a wealth of data on patient health issues, allowing targeted follow-ups, for example, for arthritis or dental promotions.

4: Set compliance goals

With the approach in place, the fourth step is to set goals the team agree to achieve. Remember, however, these are quality-of-care goals, not

financial goals and are the team's goals, not the practice owner's. The objective is to increase the number of patients receiving the best care.

The goals you set should be realistic and specific; for example, increasing dental prophylaxis compliance from 25 per cent to 35 per cent within the next 6 months.

5: Implement guidelines

Appoint a compliance champion, this will usually be a senior member of the team. He or she will lead the discussion on compliance at meetings, coordinate the development of guidelines, focus on specific areas of compliance for both training and induction, and give feedback.

6: Measure and track results

Measurement should be in terms of the number of pets receiving better care or having treatments. Repeat your audit annually. You will improve compliance in the areas you focus on and measure.

7: Celebrate small victories

Compliance should feature not just in management meetings, but be regularly referred to by the practice leadership team. Give people recognition and reward the team for reaching a halfway point in a compliance goal.

Summary

This is an opportunity capable of transforming overall animal health among your patients and transforming your practice revenue. It requires small changes in practice management and empowering clients with information, through building a compliance culture throughout your practice.