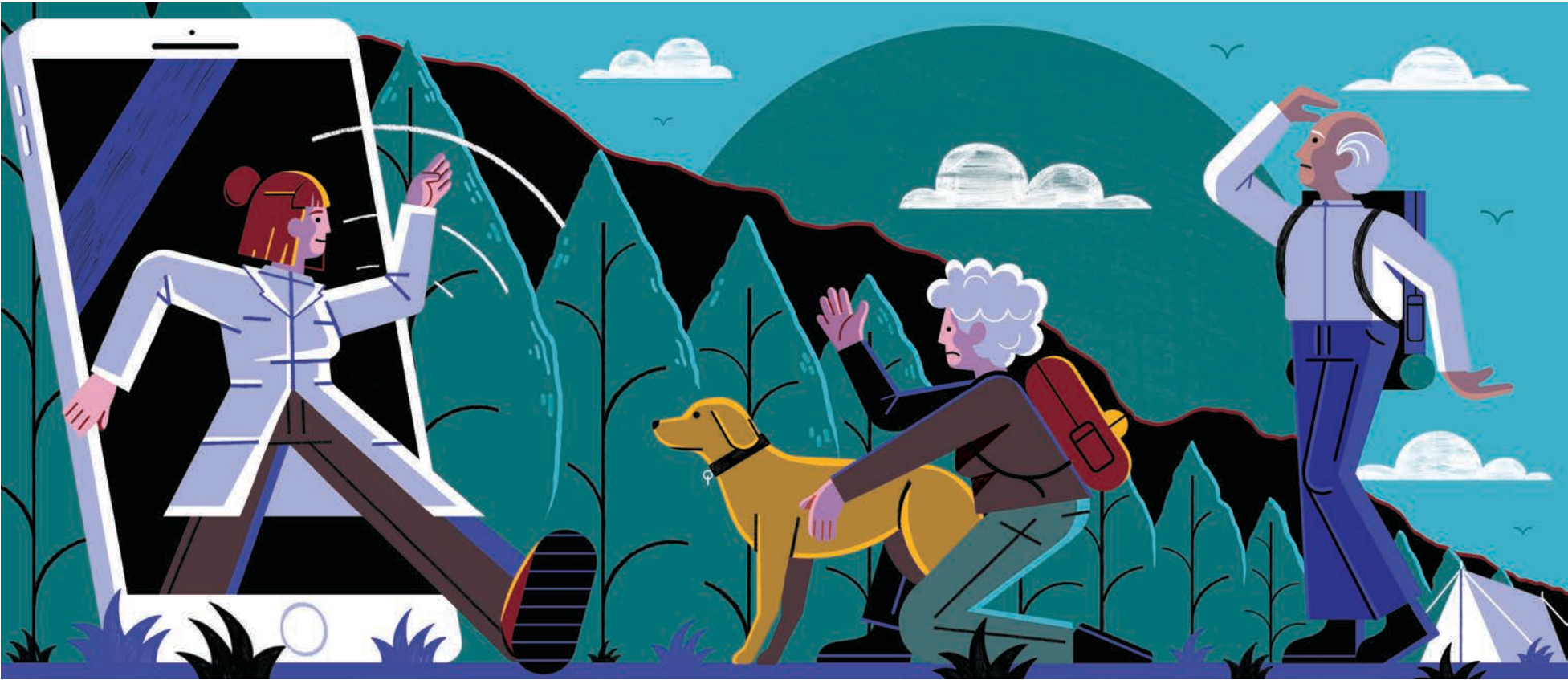




TAKING THE NEXT STEP IN TELEHEALTH

BY JENNY ALONGE, DVM, FFCP

At 3 a.m., veterinary practice owner Dr. Sharon Quinn received a video call from a client camping in Ontario’s Algonquin Provincial Park. Their brachycephalic dog was having an allergic reaction and they didn’t know what to do. The dog’s entire head was swollen and he was panting heavily. Dr. Quinn advised them to administer an appropriate dose of Benadryl and to sit with their

pet until his signs subsided. Thanks to telehealth, the dog recovered and Dr. Quinn was able to keep the client from panicking. Veterinary telemedicine is a hot topic and continues to evolve as veterinary professionals discover how they can best use the service to accommodate clients and care for patients. In today’s digital world, many pet owners want

and expect their veterinarian to provide remote services, so we can assume that telehealth will continue to grow. Telehealth has significant benefits, but some veterinarians may resist implementing the technology because they feel they can provide better care in person, they are concerned about the legal barriers or they simply do not want to onboard more technology and new processes.

Have you implemented telehealth or are you reluctant to deal with growing pains? Everyone has a different comfort level with implementing technology or telehealth as a whole. But there are steps for progress at every point in the continuum. Whether you’re a telehealth straggler, novice or innovator, this practical advice will help you navigate the next steps in veterinary telehealth.

TELEHEALTH STRAGGLERS

WHERE TO START

Implementing telehealth in your practice may seem daunting, especially if you’re not comfortable with technology. However, clients want multiple care options and many consider accessibility when choosing a veterinarian. Use these steps to get started.

Consider Telehealth’s Benefits

To help you see past the potential hurdles of telemedicine, consider its many benefits, which include:

- ▣ **Improved access to veterinary care**
In Dr. Quinn’s situation, her clients were hours from a veterinarian, with a phone as their only access to care. Similar barriers may exist for people who live in rural areas or don’t have a vehicle or driver’s license, which means their pets may not receive veterinary care if telehealth isn’t an option. Pet owners who are elderly or disabled can also benefit from telehealth, since traveling may be difficult.
- ▣ **Emergency triage**
In many cases, pet owners aren’t sure if their pet needs veterinary care. If their pet is exhibiting concerning signs at 2 a.m., they can reach out to a veterinary triage service and a professional can recommend the steps they should take. This can not only save the pet’s life but also prevent wasting the owner’s and veterinary team’s time if the pet’s condition can wait until normal business hours.
- ▣ **Reduced fear and stress**
Since many issues can be handled

without the pet needing to step foot in the veterinary practice, pets who experience fear, anxiety and stress during veterinary visits will have a better experience. This improves their quality of life and health and can also prevent your team from injuries caused by fearful pets.

- ▣ **Hospice care for end-of-life pets**
Telehealth can help you manage treatment plans for pets in hospice care to prevent difficult transportation issues and unnecessary strain on the pet and pet owner.
- ▣ **Increased revenue**
Incorporating telehealth not only can save your team time but also dramatically increase your practice’s revenue. You should charge for each interaction, plus the services will generate in-hospital appointments and diagnostics.

Dr. Hannah Lau, associate director of virtual medicine at Bond Vet, recommends that veterinarians think about the remote work they already perform.

“Keep track of how much triage advice, diagnosis and treatments you do over the phone. It’s probably more than you realize. If you aren’t doing it, then likely your staff is. Figure out the proportion of your time you spend on these calls and determine how you can implement a more efficient way to recapture that revenue,” she says.

Learn the Rules
Before implementing telehealth, veterinarians must familiarize

themselves with the rules, including the AVMA's policy on telemedicine, federal veterinarian-client-patient relationship (VCPR) requirements and their state's VCPR requirements, veterinary practice acts, pharmacy laws, licensure requirements and veterinary telehealth laws. Also, they must determine if a license is required in both states if they provide telehealth consults across state lines. A good resource is the interactive Veterinary Virtual Care Association's virtual veterinary care map (go.navc.com/3QDy0IU), which provides the VCPR laws in every state.

Dr. Crista Wallis, a veterinary telemedicine consultant, also recommends that you "[call] your insurance provider to ensure you're covered for all forms of communication with your clients." In most cases, veterinarians don't need additional liability coverage to offer telehealth services, but checking with their insurance provider is always best.

Seek Advice

In addition, Dr. Wallis recommends talking to someone who is currently

practicing telemedicine. "Find out how they use it in their hospital, what technology they use and what they feel the pros and cons are," she says. Veterinary telehealth consultants or resources such as Dr. Wallis' book, *Beyond the Clinic Walls: Your Ultimate Guide to Veterinary Virtual Care*, can be helpful.

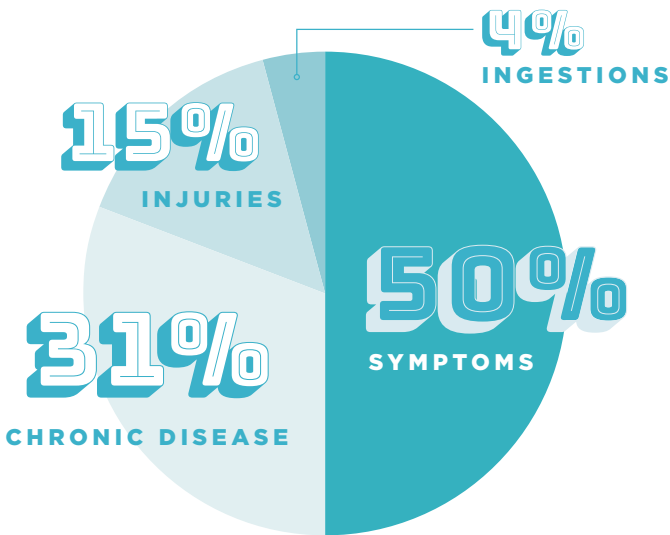
Trust Yourself

Lastly, Dr. Quinn reminds veterinarians to trust themselves and to remember that their professional judgment doesn't fly out the window when they're on a video call. "You know what you know, and you know what you don't know, but if there's information you're missing, you're always going to err on the side of caution," she says.

Dr. Quinn compares telehealth to in-person situations where the client refuses the recommended diagnostics. "Many times we have to work with missing information, but we still use our professional judgment to diagnose and treat the animal. Telehealth is no different. We may not be able to perform an abdominal palpation, but you can still determine a differential diagnosis list."

Percentage of Primary Category for all Virtual Care Cases Examined

Data from the Veterinary Virtual Care Association's "State of the Veterinary Virtual Care Industry Report 2024" (vvca.org/2024-industry-report)



Reluctant to Implement Telehealth?

Although telehealth may sound overwhelming, you're probably already providing some level of telehealth without realizing it. You can start by identifying these services, creating a more formal process for them and adding a few others. Dip your toe in the water with these telehealth services:

- ☐ Phone consultations
- ☐ Triageing patients over the phone
- ☐ Providing instructional videos about at-home care tasks such as tooth brushing and nail trimming
- ☐ Texting updates during dental cleanings and surgical procedures
- ☐ Performing simple rechecks via video chat

TELEHEALTH NOVICES

HOW TO EXPAND YOUR OFFERINGS

If you've started to implement telehealth on a small scale, you may be looking for ways to expand your offerings. You can see that communicating with clients by text and chat can be beneficial and want to take things to the next level. Keep track of your patient outcomes, client feedback and healthcare team's thoughts to determine the services that provide your practice and clients with the most value.

Know What Is Available

Investigate the available technology in the telehealth field to see what services will work best for your practice. Different services, which may require different hardware, software and support staff, include:

☐ Client communication platforms

If you're currently communicating with clients by smartphone or a general video conferencing platform, look into a veterinary telehealth-specific client communication platform. These are helpful because the system integrates with your practice management software, schedulers and payment systems. During implementation, ensure the information received through these communications is properly entered into the patients' medical records and that the privacy level meets ethical and regulatory requirements.

☐ Remote patient monitoring

Remote patient monitoring (RPM), such as wearable devices, collects data to help veterinarians determine a diagnosis and track

their patient's treatment response to provide better patient care and outcomes. The data can be accessed in many ways, including by smartphone, personal computers, laptops and tablets. When deciding on the most useful RPM devices for your practice, consider whether you and the client can easily adopt and use the technology, if you'll be able to act efficiently and promptly on the data provided, if the necessary wireless telecommunications infrastructure is available and if the information security is well established.

Involve Your Team

Your team likely realizes the benefits of your current telehealth services and will be excited to help. Train your staff and fully utilize the expertise of your entire team. "Veterinary technicians are underutilized, and telehealth is a great way to apply their knowledge and skills," says Dr. Quinn.

She recommends nutrition consultations, weight loss discussions and puppy and kitten tutorials as possible options. "We only have so much time during a new puppy and kitten appointment, but what if we offered a follow-up 20- or 30-minute telehealth consultation with a veterinary technician to cover issues such as pet insurance, training, toothbrushing, nail cutting and diet?"

Dr. Wallis agrees that the entire team should be involved. "You can have your technicians send videos on how to give medications, clean their dog's ears and trim nails."

Schedule Telehealth Duties

Dr. Lau recommends scheduling a specific veterinarian for telehealth duties each day. "For example, on Mondays and Tuesdays, Dr. Smith stays home and takes telecommunication appointments, handles email correspondence and refills prescriptions, and a different doctor performs telehealth duties on Wednesdays and Thursdays. This frees up people working in the clinic so they can focus on the patients and clients they see."

In addition, she suggests using remote employees to offload phone communications so they can fully focus on client communication. "Not having the phone ringing off the hook also helps lower stress levels and the frenetic energy in the office."

Use Telehealth to Build Client Relationships

Telehealth also improves your customer service. "At our hospital, we update clients about their pet's procedure via our app," says Dr. Wallis. "We send pictures of their pet, let them know when the procedure begins and ends, and if it's a dental, we send before and after photos so they see the benefit of the procedure. We also send diagnostics, such as blood work and X-rays, to the client to be transparent and educate them on their pet's condition."

Dr. Wallis also uses telehealth to send post-surgical instructions via an online video. "This means I don't have to go over instructions 20 times at the end of every day."

Dr. Lau points out that offering different services via virtual care has the added benefit of fewer distractions. "I find people listen better when they are in their own home. They tend to be more fully invested in the conversation."



Ready to Take the Next Step?

There are many ways you can expand your current telehealth offerings. In addition to utilizing telehealth technologies, such as client communication platforms and remote patient monitoring systems, think outside the box to determine what virtual services would most benefit your patients and clients. You can also utilize your veterinary nurses'/technicians' skills and knowledge by finding ways for them to contribute to virtual care, such as with educational videos to help improve customer service.

TELEHEALTH INNOVATORS

WHAT'S NEXT?

Many veterinarians started implementing telehealth during the COVID-19 pandemic when in-person appointments were not an option. If you've been practicing telehealth for several years, you may be ready to up your game. So, what's new for innovators in virtual care?

Remote Practice Support

Services such as Chronos (chronosvet.com) now provide remote teams to support your practice. Potential services include:

@ Virtual veterinary receptionist

A virtual veterinary receptionist can take over tasks such as answering phones, scheduling appointments, onboarding new patients and sending appointment reminders, which will relieve stress for your in-house team.

@ Virtual veterinary nurse/technician

Virtual veterinary nurses/technicians can relay estimates and treatment plans to clients, fulfill pharmacy services, provide client updates, schedule surgeries and check on a pet's recovery.

@ Patient reactivation specialists

A patient reactivation specialist helps promote your recommendations by focusing on reminders and increased client compliance.

"The pro to these services is they can start right away, while the downside is that the client won't be speaking to the staff they know and love," says Dr. Wallis. "Some clients like that and some don't, and it's

about your hospital's preference. I think the remote staffing industry is going to be very big in this space."

Dr. Quinn thinks opportunities are available for a veterinary hybrid model that combines telehealth and in-person care. "We are doing this in multiple hospitals where we have veterinary shortages. The hospital has a staff but no veterinarian, so we provide a remote veterinarian to provide the necessary care. The technicians relay information to the veterinarian, collect blood and do fecal tests, allowing the pets to get veterinary care, and this also allows the hospital to remain open and functioning, supporting the staff's salaries."

Veterinary specialty consultation services are also available. These providers allow collaboration between primary care veterinarians and board-certified specialists to help reach a diagnosis and guide treatment. For example, one provider, Vespecon (vespecon.com), offers a membership subscription for a monthly fee, or veterinarians can receive a consultation for a one-time fee. This service allows pet owners to receive a board-certified specialist's input without needing to travel or pay high fees for specialty care.

Pet Owner Education

Informed pet owners are more likely to comply with your recommendations, and taking the time to provide education can show how much you care about their pet's health. Potential telehealth-related client education opportunities you can add include:

@ Digital diagnostics

Digital diagnostics, such as microscopes and otoscopes, allow pet owners to see what you do when making a diagnosis, and digital stethoscopes let them hear their pet's murmur or arrhythmia. These tools can help your client understand their pet's condition and the value of your services.

@ Digitally enabled drug containers

Digitally enabled drug containers paired with a smartphone application can help clients remember to administer their pet's medication.

@ Client webinars

You can record or livestream videos on your social media sites to offer educational content. You can also target certain clients, such as those with pets who have chronic kidney disease or diabetes, and help them better understand the condition. The truth is, motivated pet owners are going to seek medical information online. By proactively offering this education, you are positioning yourself as an expert and saving your client from encountering misinformation.

@ Client instructions

Sending your client a video recording of their pet's discharge instructions can help them understand at-home care tasks, such as administering subcutaneous fluids or eye drops.

Remote Patient Diagnostics and Monitoring

Dr. Lau uses continuous glucose monitors to help manage her diabetic patients and at-home diagnostic products from MySimplePetLab (mysimplepetlab.com) that allow pet owners to collect samples for certain tests. "You send the client the

necessary kit, they collect the sample at home and send it back through the mail and then MySimplePetLab informs the veterinarian about the diagnostic results." Canine stool, ear and skin kits and feline stool and ear kits are currently available.

Dr. Lau — who admittedly is "always daydreaming about technologies that may help improve access to veterinary care" — also mentions that haptic technology or cameras may be used one day to perform remote procedures, such as abdominal palpations or otoscopic exams.



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Dr. Alonge is a 2002 graduate of the Mississippi State University College of Veterinary Medicine. She later joined an equine ambulatory service, where she practiced for almost 17 years. She is a veterinary copywriter for Rumpus Writing and Editing.

How Do You Stay on the Cutting Edge?

Sure, it's great to hear about existing tools that can help tech-savvy veterinary professionals offer better and more efficient care — but what about those early adopters who are looking for the next big thing? Veterinary medicine is a constantly evolving field, and there are always ways of challenging the status quo for those brave enough to try new things. Find out about new opportunities with these resources:

@ **Veterinary Innovation Council (VIC):** This group brings together forward thinkers from every corner of the industry. Stay up-to-date on the latest happenings with the VIC newsletter (go.navc.com/4bexino) or play a more active role by attending the Veterinary Innovation Summit (go.navc.com/3UxXKkZ).

@ **Today's Veterinary Business Thought Leaders:** This free bimonthly publication features regular columns written by the leading voices in our profession. For those keen on big, fresh ideas, check out the Innovation Station (go.navc.com/3JVGFjFX) and Creative Disruption (go.navc.com/4a9MyRe) series.

@ **VMX:** The annual event in Orlando, Florida, offers a prime opportunity for companies to launch new products and initiatives. Scan the expo hall to see the latest and pay special attention to the New Product Gallery and Startup Circle for up-and-comers.