

Q&A

YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED
WITH ERNIE WARD, DVM, CVFT

Q: I'm a veterinarian who feels uncomfortable treating my own pets. Even routine problems like ear infections, skin issues, or GI upset make me anxious. I worry about hurting them or missing something. Is it unprofessional to take my pets to another veterinarian for basic care?

A: Most veterinarians treat their own pets because providing routine medical care often feels, well, normal. But for some, something changes. One day, their dog's uncomplicated ear infection seems more serious than it used to. They hesitate. They second-guess. They imagine outcomes they never considered before. That moment can be unsettling.

But let's slow down. Treating your pets is not inherently unethical. Avoiding it is not a failure. The real issue isn't whether you can treat your pet, it's whether you feel comfortable doing so.

Early in my career, treating my pets was automatic. Ear infections, skin issues, GI upset, a few broken bones, more than a few tooth extractions, and a couple of heartbreaking tumors. That is still my default. But time has a way of changing how someone sees things. You've witnessed more outliers, more surprises, and more moments when "routine" didn't stay routine. That awareness can create hesitation, not because your skills declined but because the stakes feel higher when personal love is involved.



If you're calm and confident, treating your pets is completely appropriate. Treat them to the same standards as any other patient — same recordkeeping, same level of care. If you'd advise a client one way, treat your pet that way.

At the same time, stepping back is OK. Any discomfort is a signal to pause, not panic. When emotion starts steering decisions, distance can restore clarity. Handing care to a trusted colleague reflects judgment, not inadequacy.

When I feel myself doubting my ability, I hand the leash to someone I trust. Not because I can't treat my pet, but because I want a second opinion, as many clients do.

Here's the takeaway: Treat your pets if you're steady. Step back if you're rattled. Reassess as things change.

Q: I work at a veterinary clinic and can't afford our prices for my own pets, even after an employee discount. I'm thinking about taking my dog to a clinic where the care is less expensive. Would that be disrespectful to my team or employer? Do I need to say something to my boss?

A: Let's start with the part many people hesitate to say out loud. You are not alone if you work in veterinary medicine and struggle to afford care for your pet. Employee discounts don't always close the gap between the cost of veterinary care and what staff members can reasonably afford.

Across the country, pet owners are making the same hard choices. A recent PetSmart Charities-Gallup survey found that over half of U.S. pet owners skipped or declined needed veterinary care during the past year due to the costs. Even among higher-income households, roughly 1 in 3 reported doing the same. Affordability is now the most common barrier to care. So, your situation is also systemic.

Needing affordable care is a math problem, not a moral failure. The more



practical matter is not whether you should seek care for your dog elsewhere, but how you should approach the decision and the relationships around it.

Before assuming you have no other option, speak with your practice manager or clinic owner. Some hospitals have financial flexibility that isn't in the employee manual. It might include deeper discounts on certain essentials, at-cost pricing for basics, or a payment plan for staff. Sometimes the answer is no.

Choosing to go elsewhere is not inherently unethical. What matters is how you handle the situation.

If your dog receives care outside your clinic, maintain clear professional boundaries. Do not use free or discounted medications, lab work, samples, or other staff resources to support care provided by another practice. That's where trust can get strained.

If your role and the relationship allow, speak directly with your leadership. It does not need to be dramatic. A short, honest conversation is often enough. You might say something like: "This is about affordability for me right now, not confidence in our



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medicine. I wanted to be transparent so there are no misunderstandings."

For practice managers and owners, how you respond matters. Listen without judgment, avoid making the appeal personal, and focus on finding a workable path.

There is also a broader message here for clinic owners and leaders. Having multiple team members who cannot afford your fees is not a loyalty issue. It is a signal. Compensation, discounts, and benefits must reflect real-world costs, not just good intentions.

Q: I keep seeing recruiting ads on social media and job boards offering higher wages and big signing bonuses. My team is seeing them, too, which creates tension and hard conversations. Should we post pay ranges for every role? And how do we address pay gaps without blowing up the budget?

A: If you're feeling tension, you're not imagining it. Online recruitment ads, job boards, and mass emails have turned compensation into headlines. Those messages attract attention but don't explain the context. They often highlight top-of-range pay, short-term incentives, or market tests rather than average wages or long-term realities.

Once those numbers are visible, comparisons are inevitable. And silence can make it worse. Trying to shut down pay talk among staff members usually backfires. You win trust by explaining the system, not policing conversations.

The mistake many practice leaders make is to dismiss the ads or react defensively. Both approaches erode trust. Pay transparency requires explanation, not instant parity.

If your practice isn't ready to post formal pay ranges, start by explaining how it makes compensation decisions. What factors matter? Job role, experience, credentials, longevity, performance, production, and market pressure all play a part. People who understand the framework are less likely to assume favoritism or neglect.

If you post pay ranges, be clear about what they represent. Ranges describe growth over time, not a promise of immediate alignment. That distinction matters.

As for signing bonuses, call them what they are. They are recruiting tools, not value statements. They solve short-term shortages. They do not define long-term worth.

Addressing pay gaps rarely happens all at once. Identify where gaps exist and why. Prioritize retention risks and fairness concerns. Then communicate the plan, even if the timeline is gradual.

Here's the reality leaders need to accept: Pay conversations are no longer private. They're happening online, in inboxes, and in real time. Ignoring that reality creates confusion. Explaining it builds trust. **TVB**