



# Dear Doctor



News, updates, and practice tips for today's veterinarian.

Sept./Oct. 2005

## A Closer Look

# National Pet Wellness Month celebrates a year of success

**FORT DODGE AND THE AVMA CONTINUE THEIR EDUCATIONAL INITIATIVE ON TWICE-A-YEAR WELLNESS EXAMS AND THE PET AGING PROCESS.**

Sparkie, a 12-year-old Border collie, used to visit the Huntington Dog & Cat Hospital in Huntington, W.Va., only once a year. But that changed in 2004. Thanks to the efforts of the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) and Fort Dodge Animal Health's National Pet Wellness Month (NPWM), Jan Ball, DVM, discussed the importance of twice-a-year wellness visits with Sparkie's owner. As a result, the dog came in six months later for a physical exam, during which Dr. Ball discovered an oral tumor. She says that six-month visit saved Sparkie's life—if she hadn't diagnosed and removed the tumor then, the situation could have ended much differently.

"When Dr. Ball discussed wellness exams with me, her recommendation made sense,"

says Jennifer Aldridge, Sparkie's owner. "Twice-a-year exams would be good for any animal of any age. I could have lost my dog if I hadn't brought him for that exam."

Dr. Ball started recommending twice-a-year wellness exams after receiving the NPWM in-clinic education kit from Fort Dodge last year. "Conducting an exam every six months helps me pick up on problems before they become untreatable," says Dr. Ball. Staff members at her hospital mail cards to clients reminding them of their pets' twice-a-year physical exams.

Dr. Ball relies on the materials in the NPWM education kit. "The visual aids we received from Fort Dodge and the AVMA helped focus our clients' attention on the importance of twice-a-year wellness exams," she says. Dr. Ball put up NPWM posters in the hospital's exam rooms and uses them when discussing the need for twice-a-year exams with her clients.

### Recommending twice-a-year exams

In the last year, more than 12,500 veterinary clinics—about 50 percent of all U.S. clinics—have joined Dr. Ball in combining forces with the AVMA and Fort Dodge Animal Health for NPWM. Unveiled at the 2004 AVMA convention, this educational initiative encourages veterinarians to recom-

mend twice-a-year wellness exams and educate clients about the pet aging process. All participating veterinarians receive a free in-clinic education kit with posters, client literature, and point-of-sale materials about pet aging and the steps owners can take to enhance their pets' quality of life.

In early 2005, Fort Dodge and the AVMA launched the NPWM's "Spring Threats to Pets" campaign, then sent a second education kit to participating clinics and initiated a national consumer program stressing the importance of twice-a-year visits in preventing springtime diseases.

The veterinary industry has responded enthusiastically to the NPWM initiative. Many state veterinary medical associations

National Pet Wellness Month (*continued*)

### For more information

Join the National Pet Wellness Month campaign to educate pet owners about the importance of twice-a-year wellness exams. To order a free in-clinic educa-



tion kit, go to [www.npwm.com](http://www.npwm.com) and click on the Clinics Only section of the toolbar.

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## National Pet Wellness Month (continued)

are participating in the effort, and the National Commission on Veterinary Economic Issues (NCVEI) is collaborating as well. The NCVEI will soon release tools to assist veterinarians with integrating twice-a-year exams into their practices (See *New benchmarking resource to focus on wellness protocols* at right). Plus, thousands of veterinarians have visited the NPWM Web site, [www.npwm.com](http://www.npwm.com).

### Reaching out to consumers

The NPWM campaign has been an overwhelming success to date—and with good reason, says Steve Dale, syndicated columnist and host of *Animal Planet Radio* and Chicago's *Pet Central* radio show. "I give credit to Fort Dodge and the AVMA for their campaign to reach out to consumers about the importance of twice-a-year wellness exams," he says.

Dale says some veterinarians hesitate to recommend twice-a-year exams because they assume their clients won't comply. "I think that's a misplaced assumption," he says. For example, many veterinarians thought the public would never comply with pet dental health recommendations, but teeth are routinely included in wellness programs today.

The NPWM campaign has attracted a wealth of media attention with print, radio, and TV coverage reaching more than 65 million consumers. As the program continues to expand, Dale says, the public will soon begin to drive the initiative just as much as veterinarians do. "People will visit their clinics and ask to come back in six months," he says.

### Strengthening patient care

According to Dale, the main benefit of twice-a-year wellness exams is offering preventive medicine. "It's common sense," he says. "You can't treat what you can't see."

Early diagnoses mean less-progressed disease, less pain and suffering, shorter treatments, and longer, healthier lives for pets. "Plus, when most serious illnesses

## New benchmarking resource to focus on wellness protocols

The National Commission on Veterinary Economic Issues (NCVEI) will soon release a free online resource to help veterinarians integrate twice-a-year wellness exam protocols into their practices. Howard Rubin, the NCVEI's chief executive officer, says he expects to release the program, which will be available on the NCVEI's Web site ([www.ncvei.org](http://www.ncvei.org)), by early September.

The online program, which combines relevant data with benchmarking capabilities, will allow veterinarians to assess how their own wellness protocols compare with similar practices. In addition, by using the interactive online platform, veterinarians can access information about how other practices have successfully integrated wellness protocols.

"The NCVEI wants to provide veterinarians with the means to deliver high-quality care," says Rubin. "Given the life span and life cycle of companion animals, it makes perfect sense to encourage practitioners and pet owners to care for their animals more frequently. It also helps veterinarians spread their operational activities in a way that makes them more efficient."

The research used to create this tool came from a pet wellness task force of veterinary consultants and veterinarians who have successfully integrated twice-a-year exams into their practices.

For more information about the NCVEI, read *Online resource offers financial benchmarks* on page 4.

are discovered early, treatment is less expensive," Dale says.

In addition, twice-a-year wellness exams help veterinarians keep tabs on pets' behavioral problems, Dale says, and behavior changes often indicate a physical ailment. For instance, during a cat's annual visit, the owner may say to his veterinarian, "Since I saw you last year, I've finally trained my 13-year-old cat to stay off the counters." Although the owner believes the cat is obeying, it's more likely the cat has developed arthritis, Dale says. If that owner had brought his cat in every six months, the veterinarian could have started managing the arthritis and treating the cat's pain earlier.

### Explaining the pet aging process

Betty Stephenson, DVM, owner of the Greystone Pet Hospital in Bowling Green, Ky., believes in the importance of twice-a-year wellness exams. She began recommending them shortly after the NPWM initiative began last year.

"We just hadn't thought about how long it really was from one annual exam to the next before we started reading about National Pet Wellness Month," Dr. Stephenson says. "When it's explained in terms of pets

aging [the equivalent of] seven years between annual exams, it makes sense to examine them twice a year."

Dr. Stephenson says that more frequent visits allow veterinarians to provide the best possible care. "Seeing clients every six months is a better option for preventing disease," she says. What's more, Stephenson believes that increased visits improve client relations. "Wellness visits are just what some clients need."

Dr. Stephenson's clients find her recommendations easy to understand when she explains that yearly exams equate to nearly seven years between visits, she says. Her clients have reacted positively to her change in recommendations, with about 30 percent currently complying with twice-a-year exams. To educate pet owners, Dr. Stephenson discusses the pet aging process during exams and distributes brochures from the NPWM education kit to clients.

Twice-a-year wellness exams lengthen pets' lives, Dale says. "My hope is that every veterinarian in this country will become involved with National Pet Wellness Month," he says. "It's in the best interest of the animal, and it's just good medicine."

## Focus On the Practice

# Wealth in wellness

## THE REWARDS OF PREVENTIVE MEDICINE EXTEND TO VETERINARIANS, PATIENTS, AND CLIENTS.

By Hank Swartz, DVM, MBA

Helping sick and injured pets—it's one of the biggest reasons you became a veterinarian and why you find the profession so rewarding. But what about healthy pets? Although the circumstances surrounding their care are usually less dramatic, the fact remains: There's wealth in wellness, too. After all, providing preventive care helps animals lead longer, healthier, happier lives, and it supports the practice financially so you can continue practicing veterinary medicine at the highest level.

While wellness revenue is one of the most accessible and controllable paths to practice growth, it's also one of the most underutilized. According to data at Veterinary Metrics Inc., the average practice achieves only 18 percent of its potential wellness revenue. In addition, 20 percent to 40 percent of total revenues generated during wellness visits stem from nonwellness-related problems discovered during those visits. The bottom line: You have an untapped source of wellness revenue and the chance to intercede earlier on behalf of pets' health. Reward yourself—and your patients—by following these steps:

**1. Analyze your current performance.** First, determine how many current canine and feline patients received wellness services and products within the last 12 months. Wellness services include physical examinations, diagnostic screenings, intestinal parasite testing, distemper and rabies vaccinations, and dental examinations. Products include flea, tick, and heartworm preventives and nutritional products. Compare your findings with the total number of current patients that could have received those same products and services. The difference

indicates the gap in the practice's total wellness revenue potential.

**2. Standardize your preventive program.**

This step requires practice-wide uniformity when communicating with clients. Every staff member who helps promote wellness services and products to clients should be delivering the same information regarding descriptions, prices, and importance. This is where staff training becomes crucial. At a special meeting, explain the practice's preventive care philosophy, its compliance goals, and staff members' roles in achieving those goals. Bring written descriptions of each service and product (including prices), along with wellness scripts, and review them until everyone feels comfortable with their knowledge. Don't forget to follow up in subsequent meetings to address any problems or changes with the wellness program.

**3. Maximize your reminder system.**

Historically, veterinary practices have relied almost exclusively on vaccinations to drive preventive care visits. But maximizing your reminder system means structuring it to send reminders (at the desired frequency) for all of the services and products listed in step No. 1—not just vaccinations. Think of your reminder system as the driving force behind wellness revenue. There's a profound correlation between sending specific reminder requests and clients complying with those requests. In other words, you get what you ask for, or, conversely, you don't get what you don't ask for.

As for vaccination reminders, keep sending them. Veterinary Metrics data indicate that vaccination reminders are still 10 percent more likely to elicit client responses



than requests for physical examinations. Equally important: Update vaccination reminders if your vaccination protocols change. In another Veterinary Metrics study, 14 practices that had received consistent response rates for vaccination reminders experienced an aggregate 11 percent response-rate decline when they switched from requesting annual vaccinations to an alternate-year protocol with the words "vaccination review" printed on the reminders (not a list of the needed vaccinations). This translates to 270 fewer pet visits and about \$40,000 to \$50,000 in unrealized annual revenue for the average two-doctor practice.

Caring for healthy pets can be just as rewarding as treating pets for a serious disease or injury. Preventive medicine keeps countless dogs and cats healthier longer—and that can save clients money in the long run. It also provides your practice with the revenue it needs to flourish. Ten years from now, when you walk in the examination room to greet the healthy, happy dog or cat that you've been seeing since puppy or kittenhood, you'll realize the true wealth in wellness.

*Dr. Swartz is the director of business strategy at Veterinary Metrics Inc. in Atlanta.*

## Online resource offers financial benchmarks

**THE NCVEI HELPS VETERINARIANS COMPARE GROSS REVENUE, PRICING, AND OTHER FINANCIAL DATA WITH COLLEAGUES NATIONWIDE.**

Do healthier profits mean healthier patients? Howard Rubin, CPA, MBA, chief executive officer of the National Commission on Veterinary Economic Issues (NCVEI), answers that question with a resounding “yes!” Why? The organization’s Web site says it best: “Quality patient care requires a sound economic foundation.” Since January 2000, the NCVEI has remained true to its mission by showing practitioners how to succeed in business and offer cutting-edge healthcare.

### How it all began

In 1998, the AVMA, American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA), and Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges (AAVMC) formed a committee to determine the current and projected economic states of the veterinary profession. The committee commissioned KPMG LLP Economic Consulting Services, an international consulting firm, to conduct a comprehensive study. The findings led committee members to identify critical issues impacting the profession’s economic health, including stagnant incomes, a global demand for veterinary services, and an inefficient system for delivering veterinary services.

At about the same time, the original Brakke companion animal study brought similar findings to light. The formation

of the NCVEI was a direct result of these studies. “The committee didn’t want the data to just sit on a shelf and gather dust,” says Rubin. “They wanted a forum where parties could meet to address these problems and formulate action steps.”

To spread the word about the nonprofit corporation’s goals, NCVEI leaders organized regional, state, and national meetings and created a Sponsors’ Council to enlist industry support. Companies such as Fort Dodge Animal Health, a sponsor since May 2002, have answered the call by contributing annual stipends.

In addition, Fort Dodge and other company representatives sit side-by-side with board members to analyze current and emerging animal-health issues and develop results-driven policies. “As a leading manufacturer of veterinary pharmaceuticals and products, Fort Dodge is in an ideal position to actively participate with the NCVEI,” says Rubin.

### Interactive tools

On the NCVEI Web site, [www.ncvei.org](http://www.ncvei.org), veterinarians can access the KPMG and Brakke study summaries. Both small animal and equine veterinarians will also find 38 interactive tools at the Exam Room enabling them to compare their practice’s gross revenue, fees, and other financial information with data entered by other veterinarians.



NCVEI's Web site, [www.ncvei.org](http://www.ncvei.org), offers benchmarking and other interactive tools to help veterinarians assess their practices' health.

According to the commission, three issues hastened the development of the online resources:

- Veterinarians typically undercharge for their services.
- Recent graduates are burdened with substantial debt.
- Clinic owners often lack business-related expertise.

Introduced in January 2002, the tools are free to AVMA, AAHA, AAVMC, and Canadian VMA members. The Web site also features a track designed for support staff members. The NCVEI plans to launch comparable tools for mixed and food animal practitioners in the early fall of 2005.

“As of today, more than 10,000 practices make use of our benchmarking tools, which represents about 26,000 veterinarians,” says Rubin. “As more veterinarians log on and submit their figures, the database will keep getting bigger—and better.”

*Dear Doctor* is brought to you by Fort Dodge Animal Health. To reach us, write *Dear Doctor*, Editorial Office, 8033 Flint, Lenexa, KS 66214; e-mail [thedeardocor@yahoo.com](mailto:thedeardocor@yahoo.com); or call (800) 255-6864, ext. 154. Copyright 2005 by Fort Dodge Animal Health. Reproduction without prior permission from Fort Dodge Animal Health is prohibited. FDP C0363T

### For more information

Log on to the NCVEI Exam Room today at [www.ncvei.org](http://www.ncvei.org).