Walking the Tightrope: Talking to Clients About Zoonotic Diseases

Educating clients is seldom easy. Educating them about zoonoses (i.e., diseases that are communicable from animals to humans under natural conditions) is always a challenge. Veterinary technicians walk a fine line between raising client awareness so the veterinarian’s recommendations are followed and pets remain healthy, and overly alarming clients about potential risk to the family’s health.

Veterinary technicians are the key to client communication; they are the team members who can take time to explain disease transmission principles, educate clients about preventing transmission, and help clients implement the veterinarian’s recommendations at home. Use the following blueprint to develop a zoonoses education plan for clients.

Establish, Educate, Equip

1. Establish the veterinary practice and, in turn, the veterinary technician as authorities on zoonotic and vector-borne disease potential. Technicians should reinforce the veterinarian–client–patient relationship. It is necessary to have a firm grasp of the subject in order to educate clients.

See related stories, Bacterial Pathogens: Busting the Myths of Zoonoses, page 20, & Clinical Suite: Canine Leptospirosis, page 24, of this issue.
so stay abreast of incidence, prevention, testing, therapeutics, and products related to zoonotic and vector-borne diseases. For the sake of both animal and human health, clients must develop a respect for zoonoses without developing unwarranted fears about diseases, in their pets or themselves.

2 Educate clients about universal precautions and zoonotic and vector-borne diseases prevalent in your area. First, clients must know that regular veterinary visits, animal waste cleanup, and simple hand washing will prevent a great deal of potential zoonotic disease transmission (see Client Education About Zoonoses). As clients become familiar with zoonoses and the ease of prevention, they are less likely to become alarmed when they hear reports of “outbreaks” from friends or the media.

Next, help the entire veterinary team stay atop zoonotic and vector-borne diseases prevalent in your region or state by monitoring updates from your state Department of Health (DOH). Most state DOH websites maintain a page with an overview of animal contact and human health or zoonotic disease reporting; your practice can periodically check this site to monitor diseases showing up in your area.

3 Equip clients with the ability to locate additional reliable resources about zoonotic and vector-borne diseases. Every great veterinary technician knows that half the battle is having the answers and communicating effectively with clients. The other half is knowing when to say, “I’m not sure, but I will find that answer for you.” Take this a step further; teach the client to have a discerning eye when it comes to using the internet (see Reputable Resources). Because clients will never stop looking things up online, we should instead help them find appropriate resources. Again, the state DOH website is an excellent place to start. Print out client handouts or pull up the website on an examination room computer to show the client directly.

Unique Opportunity
The technician’s confidence level can directly impact client acceptance of the message. Be familiar with zoonotic disease prevalence, transmission, prevention, and treatment to better ensure client compliance.

While educating clients about zoonoses, veterinary technicians have a unique opportunity to reinforce the veterinarian–client–patient relationship through client communication.

See Aids & Resources, back page, for references & suggested reading.

Reputable Resources
Steer clients to reputable internet sources for information on zoonotic diseases, including:

- Companion Animal Parasite Council Recommendations: capcvet.org/capc-recommendations
- Keeping Pets Healthy Keeps People Healthy Too. U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: cdc.gov/healthypets/
- Promoting Safe Pet Ownership. Worms & Germs Blog, University of Guelph & Centre for Public Health and Zoonoses: wormsandgermsblog.com