

The Holiday season means many things to many people. For some it means family reunions and other such joyous (or not so joyous) get-togethers, for others it's a difficult time filled with stress and anxiety, or even sadness. I find myself somewhere in the middle, experiencing a little of all those emotions. There are also all the social events: an office party, a special dinner with friends, civic and school functions that celebrate the season. Most of the people I see or meet during these functions know, or quickly find out, I'm a veterinarian. There's nothing special about that, but it does mean I usually hear about their last trip to their veterinarian's office. I really don't mind hearing about their pet's medical dilemma, in fact I enjoy trying to help if I can. If nothing else it serves as an "ice-breaker" of sorts. Interestingly, many pet owners also share with me how much money they spent during that visit. Judging by the number of comments I receive on the subject, the cost of veterinary health care seems a worthy topic for this month's column.

I know a trip to the veterinarian can sometimes be expensive. This issue warrants discussion because it's an important factor that needs to be addressed with every veterinary medical case. The fact is, in comparison to the human medical field, veterinary medicine still remains a tremendous bargain.

Most veterinarians believe the family pet is a vital part of the family, deserving medical care based on the same fundamental standards and principles of human medical care. Why shouldn't our animal family members get well trained doctors and nurses, modern diagnostic and therapeutic options, safe and proven medications, and most importantly a compassionate health care provider? The answer to this rhetorical question is obvious-they should get all those things; but the problem is these components of medical care are costly.

From IV fluids and medications to bandage materials to the disinfectant used to clean exam tables, the medical supplies veterinary hospitals purchase are no different than those used in human hospitals. The per-unit cost of many of these supplies may actually be higher for the veterinary hospital because the volume they purchase is much less than that of a large human hospital.

Doctors and support staff such as nurses, assistants, receptionists, office managers and kennel personnel all want, and rightly deserve, compensation packages that allow them to work in the profession they love and support their families at the same time. Sadly though, these dedicated professionals are still compensated at levels well below their "human medicine" counterparts.

Many veterinary offices across the country now offer full medical coverage and retirement programs among other benefits for their dedicated staff. The obvious logic here is that a happy veterinary health care team is more likely to be a more careful, caring and involved veterinary health care team; ultimately delivering better care to their patients. These benefits are wonderful but they add considerable cost to the operation of a veterinary facility.

In addition to the "people" costs of veterinary health care, facility and equipment costs can add significant expense to the picture. Advanced laboratory services, ultrasound, endoscopy, specialized surgical services, cancer treatment, and referral center MRI and CAT scans are all common and vital parts of animal health care today.

Some ask “do we really need such fancy medical procedures and tools for our pets?” the answer to this question is a complex one, but if the recent growth of specialty veterinary medical services is any indication, the pet owning public has decided this advanced car should at least be available, and indeed many are demanding these services for their pets. As veterinary care becomes more sophisticated and as more pets enjoy levels of health care once thought impossible just a few years ago, there will be attendant costs that ultimately will be born by the pet owning public.

In response to the growing cost of veterinary medical care, many veterinary hospitals are looking to various innovative payment plans or outside credit programs to help people afford care for their pets. Medical insurance for pets is the answer for some, but because that is rather involved topic I’ll save that discussion for a future column.

Veterinarians, for their part, must always remain sensitive to the fact that the cost of a pet’s health care can be, and often is, an issue for many families. A veterinarian is morally obligated (and you should expect this of him/her) to offer what he or she thinks is medically best for your pet. This may or may not involve costly care. Whatever the circumstances, the veterinarian needs to be aware of the potential costs and work within the pet owner’s budget to ultimately provide the best care possible.

Hopefully this holiday season will bring you (and your pet) happiness, health, and warm joyous times with family and friends. If you happen to go to any social events and meet a veterinarian, I’m sure he or she would love to hear all about your pet, including any medical concerns. With any luck his or her sympathy will extend to your pocketbook as well as your pet. Happy Holidays!

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