MIND THE GAP PLEASE

Creating Compliance In A Non-compliant World

Be honest, do you floss night and day? Every time I sit in the hygienist chair, I’m waiting for the post-examination lecture about flossing twice daily. On my last hygienist visit, I had an epiphany. How could I, in all honesty, work with veterinary practices to improve compliance if I couldn’t hand on heart admit to 100% compliance myself?

Compliance is a strange anomaly in the human psyche. Despite knowing something is good for us and will deliver positive results for our physical, emotional and sometimes even financial well-being, we find following certain instructions so much harder than others. Most of us won’t need to be told twice to pay for our car insurance, thankfully according to the Motor Insurers Bureau only 3.5% are uninsured, yet 25% of people on life saving drugs admit that they do not take their medicines as prescribed.

According to the American Animal Hospital Association, compliance is “the measure of whether pets actually receive the care that veterinarians and the profession believe is best for them.” Improved compliance is clearly better for the health of the nation’s animals but will also significantly increase a practice’s financial performance. Yet despite this very obvious and engaging equation, why is it that compliance remains the Holy Grail?

A vet I know, who shall remain nameless, jokes, ‘most vets believe compliance is an issue in all vet practices except theirs’. He might be on the money.

Sadly, as the figures in human medicine demonstrate, and my flossing issues corroborate, poor compliance could be defined as the default setting in all of us, not just pet owners. One way to re-programme this is to promote concordance alongside compliance, on the basis that patients are more likely to adhere to their, or in this case their pets’ medication if they agree with the prescriber, the vet, about the nature of the condition and the risks and benefits of the proposed treatment. But to achieve this simple equation, it’s first important to understand the issues that lead to non-compliance. These may be intentional, e.g. cost of the medication, or non-intentional such as a lack of belief about the benefits or the advice given, no guarantees and negative influences from media or personal opinion.
In a recent YouGov omnibus survey carried out by Zoetis in relation to pain medication, a third (33%) confirmed that the vet either hadn’t explained the importance of both accurate timing of dosing and completing the course or they couldn’t recall it. This doesn’t necessarily mean the vet is not providing the information, it may be that in some cases the information is provided but not in a format that resonates with the client. Remember, when achieving concordance, one size does not fit all.

The consult room really is the engine room of the veterinary practice. The effectiveness of what happens in that room impacts every aspect of the practices' success from client care to revenue generation and can have a major bearing on compliance. Despite the best clinical skills, if a vet cannot convey information which owners can understand and will comply with, the clinical excellence and value of this will be lost on the owner. Take the time to review the client notes before the appointment to identify if a recommendation was made in the previous consult, ask if this was followed up and, if not, explain again why the recommendation is necessary. When vets give a clear call to action, owners tend to act but the line ‘you ought to think about doing something regarding…’ will be an immediate closed door.

Dental is one area where recommendations are notoriously weak. While a practice will understand the importance, on average only 30% of older patients are actually receiving dental treatments. This is often because the client doesn’t understand the importance of this treatment and considers it a ‘nice to have’, especially if there is no clear direction from the vet. In addition, not all practices will regularly carry out dental scoring so it’s harder for vets to monitor dental health from one visit to the next.

Vaccinations can be the bread and butter of a practice’s income stream and present a perfect opportunity to build relationships and loyalty with owners. However, all too often I have witnessed vaccination clinics being treated as a ‘catch-up’ time so vet and owner don’t manage to have an ‘entire health’ conversation regarding preventative care.

Often the biggest stumbling block to improving preventative care compliance is the practice team’s own concern that they are becoming a sales team. It’s a common problem and one that I can relate to as a qualified veterinary nurse, however it’s important to remember that the vet, veterinary nurse and to a large extent, the reception team, are viewed by the owner
as the experts in pet health. Suggesting a flea treatment or booking in for a vaccination is not ‘flogging products’ it’s providing a recommendation because it’s the right thing to do for the health of the pet. If you don’t give clear unequivocal advice the client won’t appreciate the importance of it and it could compromise the health of the pet.

I have been working with an increasing number of practices in recent years looking at key areas in the business for which compliance is notoriously poor, such as vaccination, dental and parasite treatments. The best performing practices only have 50% of clients purchasing worming products and 41% purchasing their flea products from the practice, and even then, can we be sure these owners are following the best protocols of 12 flea and two to four worming treatments in a 12 month period? There is clearly an opportunity for growth and these areas can all be influenced positively by the practice. Through Compliance Gap Analysis, benchmarking the practice figures against the national average as determined by the Performance Index, it’s possible to assess the business opportunity and the potential health benefit for the practice’s clients.

The Performance Index provides a benchmark for practices looking to establish Compliance Gap Analysis.
Once we have completed the Compliance Gap Analysis the practice is able to see the areas of opportunity and where efforts should be focussed. In my role, I would invariably do an audit of 100 consults, sitting in the consult room to monitor if there are clear recommendations and also if these are being followed, usually by reviewing the notes on file.

Compliance will often be considered too much hard work but it’s one that can deliver almost overnight success to the turnover of the veterinary practice. And, unlike many other strategies to drive turnover, there are few financial investments that need to be made. There are seven practical steps for improved patient compliance that a management team could implement within their own practice setting:
1. **Compliance Gap Analysis**

Before making any plans, it’s essential to determine the current state of play to establish your own Compliance Gap Analysis. There are industry benchmarks available for the most common preventative treatments, review these against your practice’s own figures to establish where there is a gap. Utilise the results of your analysis to identify the greatest gaps as this will usually identify the greatest opportunity. If this is your first foray, it’s worth focussing on one or two areas to target rather than trying to cover everything and confusing the team or your clients.

2. **Firm objectives**

Once your area of focus is identified, establish firm and measurable objectives e.g. a 10 per cent increase in the uptake of Pet Health Care Plans by the end of the next quarter.

3. **Staff buy-in**

Meeting the objectives relies on buy-in from the whole team, not just the practice owner. If staff believe they are simply being asked to ‘sell’, the activity is destined for failure. Share details of the current financial situation; explain why the objectives have been set and the benefits of meeting these goals. Too often a strong programme fails because the whole team is not behind it, so train your staff in the importance of improved compliance, not just what this means for the business but also the benefits for the pet’s health. People need to feel comfortable with the approach and plan. If they are on-board and a part of it the chances of success are significantly increased. Team training should help staff to determine client needs and manage interactions to make effective recommendations appropriate to their pet’s needs. By avoiding a ‘one size fits all’, staff and owners feel engaged that the proposed plan or treatment is in the best interest of the animal, not just the practice profit margin.

4. **Prepare and plan for clients**

Plan ahead for client visits so that all members of the team are aware of the possible healthcare needs of the animal. For example, if an owner makes an appointment for their dog’s booster, the reception staff should also mention the Pet Healthcare Plan and then send an introductory letter and leaflet to the owner ahead of the booster appointment. When they come in to the practice, the owner is already aware of the plan and time should be made in the appointment for the vet to discuss this in more detail. And in a final touch-point, a letter, text message or call from the practice helps to ensure the owner feels valued by the practice and is well informed about the options available for on-going care of their pet.
For non-active clients, create a targeted campaign to encourage them back into practice. This may take the form of a vaccine reminder card, followed by a call from the practice and another tailored communication. The PrintRoom service from Zoetis is ideal for this type of campaign.

5. Educate and communicate

Educating owners is key – remember, through concordance you can significantly improve compliance. There is no benefit in simply alluding to a necessary treatment, owners look to vets and the practice team to make appropriate and professional recommendations on their behalf. But it’s essential that in educating, they use appropriate methods of communication and adapt themselves to reflect the clients’ personality; where this connection is greater, the likelihood of client agreement and hence compliance is also greater.

6. Follow-up

A very simple stage but sadly one that can be easily overlooked. Once the owner has left the practice, leaflet safely in hand, it’s essential that the line of communication remains open. The preceding steps are redundant if there is no follow-up to engender compliance. The follow-up will help owners who are confused by the treatment path and provide reassurance for others, but most importantly it’s another very strong opportunity to continue to bond that client to the practice.

7. Maintain

The simplest of all the phases but often forgotten. A bit like my flossing, I’m great for the first few weeks and then maybe not quite so rigorous. Ensure that time is allocated on a regular basis to review the original objectives. Are you continuing to meet these? Allocate time to keep the newly compliant clients on the right track and to maintain momentum to bring the non-compliant clients on-board.

For veterinary practices keen to create a positive response in a relatively short timeframe and with minimal investment, identifying the opportunities through Compliance Gap Analysis is a powerful place to start. Not only will this deliver an improvement to the bottom line, the new challenges it presents to the team as a whole, when delivered correctly, can really energise the practice. Clients feel bonded and important to the practice because they have been offered positive and useful recommendations. If only my hygienist could do the same for me!
CASE STUDY (March 2013):
A Business Consultant from Zoetis carried out a Compliance Gap Analysis with a practice in the South West. The analysis showed that there was room for a Pet Healthcare Plan.

**Before: Identifying the opportunity**

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<th>Practice</th>
<th>Benchmark</th>
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Together, the practice leadership team and Vet Support+ Business Consultant identified two target customer groups to communicate with about the healthcare plans; those coming in for vaccination and new puppy and kitten registrations.

Team training and planning sessions were run to help staff in determining client needs, managing each client interaction, awareness of language patterns, making effective recommendations and gaining client agreement to ultimately create a framework for an entire practice team approach.

Following the team training, a schedule was created for tailored contact with the two target groups. This approach relied on input from all members of the team to ensure success, from the reception as the first contact with the client, through to the vets interaction and the follow-up contact the client receives.

By working together the team were able to report a very impressive improvement in just twelve weeks;

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<tr>
<td>Pet Healthcare Plan clients</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
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Vanessa Wilson is a Business Consultant at Zoetis, dedicated to working closely with Veterinary Practices across the South West of England to help identify and implement strategies to improve their business performance and profitability.

With her roots in veterinary nursing and the animal health industry, Vanessa has more than 20 years experience in training management, business consultancy and business research helping businesses, teams and individuals gain focus on where they want to be, where they are now and enabling them to achieve their goals. An NLP practitioner, Vanessa holds a post graduate degree with the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development and remains an active member of the Institute.

Through her work Vanessa has taken inspiration and learned alongside leading Veterinary Practice Management experts from around the globe to share in her everyday work with people who own and work in Veterinary Practices.