



Information For Human Health Professionals Interested in Veterinary Dentistry

Please read the AVDC Veterinary Dental Health Care Providers position statement that is available on the AVDC web site, which briefly describes the legal requirements for providers of professional veterinary dental care.

This document provides additional information for human health care professionals.

The American Veterinary Dental College often receives communications from dentists and dental hygienists or dental assistants requesting information about how to become involved in veterinary dentistry. It is an exciting and challenging field.

A generation ago, veterinarians received little education on dental conditions and procedures in veterinary school. That has changed considerably - all veterinary schools now provide at least some dental education in their curriculum, and veterinary dentistry has been recognized as a clinical veterinary specialty in its own right for 20 years. Rapid progress has been made in part as a result of contributions from human dental health professionals; however, one result of the enhanced standard of dental care now provided by veterinarians is that opportunities for involvement of human dental health professionals are more limited than they used to be.

In every US state and Canadian province, veterinary dentistry is legally part of the practice of veterinary medicine. Therefore a veterinary license is required to diagnose and treat veterinary patients with oral and dental conditions and diseases. In some states, practice regulations provide for the possibility of collaborative care under the direct supervision of a veterinarian. Practice regulations for your jurisdiction are often available on-line –try <http://www.aavsb.org/>.

Knowing the differences as well as the similarities between human and veterinary dentistry is critical, as the examples below indicate. A good starting point would be to review a veterinary dental textbook – several are now available. With few exceptions, veterinary dental procedures are designed to be completed in a single episode to avoid the need for multiple anesthetic episodes – having a full range of the right equipment, instruments and supplies available the first time is essential.

One obvious difference from human dental practice is that veterinary patients do not readily open their mouths willingly and stay still for diagnostic and treatment procedures. Thus the clinician responsible for the patient needs to know how to assess general health and anesthetic risk of the patient, how to give sedation or anesthesia effectively and safely, and how to ensure that the recovery from general anesthesia will be uneventful. This is one major reason why the practice of veterinary dentistry is limited legally to licensed veterinarians and must be performed at a licensed veterinary facility; therefore, the dental equipment needed for a procedure must be available at or be transported to the veterinary facility. Another important difference between human and veterinary dentistry is that communication about the case, including diagnosis,

prognosis, treatment options and cost, occurs through a third party (the client) rather than directly with the patient. Accurate and prompt communication is critical; veterinary medical practice regulations in some states require that a legal veterinarian-client-patient relationship is established before treatment of a veterinary patient can be undertaken.

Examples of differences between human and veterinary patients:

1. Periodontal disease is by far the most common condition requiring treatment in veterinary patients. On-going, frequent home care is less likely to have a high compliance rate – owners prefer to play ball with their dog rather than brush their dogs' teeth. Encouraging dogs and cats to clean their own teeth with chewing aids (diets, chew treats, and chew toys) is moderately effective. The Veterinary Oral Health Council (www.VOHC.org) provides an objective, pre-set standard for recognition of products that are effective for retarding plaque and calculus (tartar) accumulation. Extraction as a salvage treatment for periodontal disease is commonly required and standard human extraction forceps are rarely appropriate – dogs and cats manage very well with no teeth.
2. Caries is rare in dogs and cats (the mouths of carnivores are slightly alkaline); however, in cats, dental resorption is very common.
3. A human endodontist well equipped for all human endodontic procedures would rapidly find him- or herself out of his or her depth, literally, when performing root canal treatment on the canine tooth of a German Shepherd dog. Human endodontic files are at best only half the length required.
4. Fractured teeth are common in dogs, and restorative and prosthodontics techniques can be applied to veterinary patients. Because the teeth do not sit next to each other in an arch configuration, the lateral shearing force on a canine tooth in a large dog can be as high as 1000 Newtons. A prosthodontic crown on a canine tooth of a dog requires considerable expertise to function for the life of the patient – a dislodged crown is another anesthetic episode.
5. Esthetics may be important to the owner; however, they appear to be of little or no interest to veterinary patients. It is not ethical to perform procedures purely to meet an esthetic consideration of the owner of the animal, and altering the natural dental arcade of a dog or cat for show purposes is both illegal and unethical.
6. Financial considerations often enter the picture, complicated by the requirement for pre-operative general health assessment including laboratory work, plus the cost of anesthesia. Thus the total cost of a dental procedure on a veterinary patient may be higher than for a similar procedure on a human patient, and insurance to cover the cost of involved dental treatment of veterinary patients is rarely carried by owners. Financial considerations when two professionals are working together - the veterinarian and a human dental health professional – make it unlikely that veterinary dentistry will be a remunerative possibility for a human dental health professional.

If, despite these constraints, you are interested in the next step, contact local veterinarians in your area to find one that may be interested in discussing possibilities further. If you would like to learn more about veterinary dentistry, consider reading one of the several veterinary dental textbooks that are available or attending the Veterinary Dental Forum <http://www.veterinarydentalforum.com>.