

REFERRAL RELATIONSHIPS IN COMPANION ANIMAL VETERINARY MEDICINE

EXECUTIVE OVERVIEW

The landscape of veterinary medicine is ever changing, but slow to adopt a clinically-based referral system. In an effort to support evolution of care for companion animals and identify needs gaps to ease referral barriers, VetSOAP completed the first step in analyzing referral dynamics through an intensive literature review. This literature review summarizes existing information regarding collaborative referral dynamics between the Primary Care Veterinarian (pcDVM) and veterinary specialists. The study also compares this information to available information for the human health and human dentistry arenas. The review uncovered knowledge and process gaps that exist and supports continued areas of study.

Over one hundred published sources involving referral data across multiple disciplines of veterinary and human medicine as well as dentistry were analyzed and reviewed for this study.

SUMMARY OF INFORMATION GATHERED

Market Dynamics – Factors impacting the veterinary profession overall can influence the increase and/or decrease of referral frequency. This literature review surfaced market dynamics and possible trends to be considered for tracking and evaluated for impact on referral dynamics. For example:

- Market dynamics that could impact DVM competition: Visits to the pcDVM have been in decline to slight growth, there is a reported increased number of specialists as well as an increased number of new graduates which are reported to be less likely to refer.

pcDVM Referral Dynamics – Cost, relationship, and communication appear as frequent barriers to referral.

- Current indications point to a difference between the pcDVM's perception of the client's willingness to pay and the client's actual willingness to pay. These pcDVM perceptions affect their willingness to refer.
- A common driver for a client's selection of a specialist is recommendation by pcDVM; a recommendation which relies on a trusted relationship built on good communication between professionals.
- Prompt communication methodologies between pcDVM and specialists are needed and not routinely available.
- Clients and pcDVMs want clear recommendations along with all of the options and a full explanation of costs.

Pet Owner Dynamics – pcDVM referral remains primary source of pet owner awareness with pcDVM indicating that pet owner request is not common.

- Pet owner awareness of specialists remains low.
- Referred clients place high value and regard toward the pcDVM who makes the referral.

Parallels Between Veterinary and Human Disciplines – There are significant and noteworthy similarities between veterinary medicine and the human dental profession in regards to referral relationships. However, these

professions currently have divergent referral methodologies involving clinical referral, standard business practices, and client expectations.

- pcDentists see referral as part of their practice rather than a potential loss of revenue.
- Few clients assume that their general dentist has all of the expertise to serve their dental needs.
- The relationship between primary care and specialty human dentistry is comfortable and symbiotic.

CONTINUED AREAS OF STUDY

While the in-depth Literature Review provides perspective, additional research and data is required to truly understand gaps and identify potential solutions to improve the referral dynamic and collaborative patient care in veterinary medicine. As a result, VetSOAP is continuing research efforts into understanding specific gaps in the pcDVM/Specialist referral dynamic, client satisfaction and patient outcomes. VetSOAP has prioritized these areas/topics:

Financial Impact of pcDVM Referral – Does a robust referral dynamic result in a healthier/more successful pcDVM practice and by what measures?

- Define the metrics to employ for defining a healthier/more successful pcDVM practice. (Include: growth, revenue, client loyalty, community reputation, etc.)
- Define the indications for referral by representative clinical case types. Measure frequency of referral occurrence by representative clinical case types and stage of disease presentation.
- What % of patients are referred from healthy, successful practices compared to clinics not typically referring – is the difference minimal or remarkable?
- How can industry improve and/or promote the referral process?

pcDVM Referral Dynamics – Benchmark successful pcDVM/Specialist relationships.

- What are the characteristics of a successful pcDVM and specialist relationship?
- What do pcDVMs and Specialists expect from each other and what the factors remain to be optimized in the relationship? What are the obstacles to prompt communication methodologies?
- Research is required to determine the current magnitude of the differential (and the presence of the differential) between pcDVM's perception of willingness to pay and client's willingness to pay. How does the availability of pet insurance and/or financing influence the perception? In addition, research is required to determine the impact of these perceptions on the pcDVM's willingness to refer.

Client Satisfaction and Patient Outcomes:

- What is the pet owner's awareness of, understanding of, and expectations related to the field of veterinary specialists? What is their perception of the referral process and care outcome?
- How does the referral experience impact the clients' perception of the pcDVM and the veterinary practice?
- Do companion animals with a variety of conditions lead healthier and longer lives with early referral and extended collaborative care?

SUMMARY

Defining and creating a path forward to advance veterinary patient care; to provide longer, healthier patient lives and create overall economic progress for our profession are goals many of us in the veterinary community share. It is evident from this extensive review of the present state of referral dynamics that shifting toward adoption of a true symbiotic and collaborative healthcare approach for the patient is likely part of this critical path forward. VetSOAP is committed to continuing qualitative and quantitative studies toward understanding and achieving these common goals in support of the veterinary profession.